



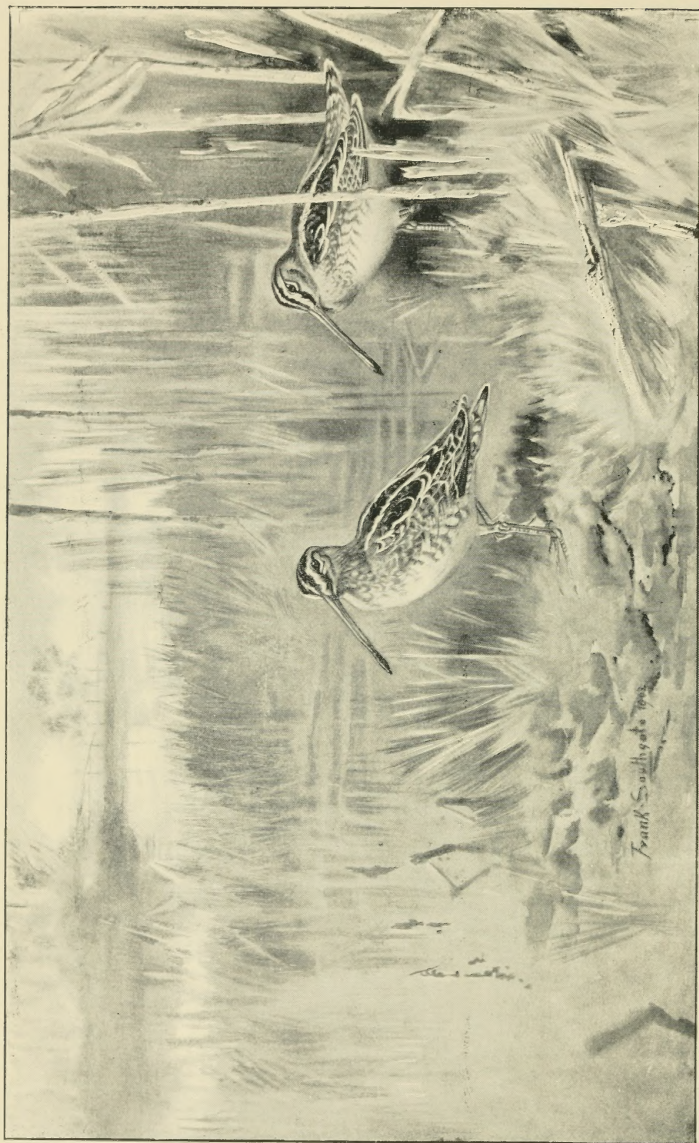


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STORRS L. OLSON

A BOOK OF THE SNIPE



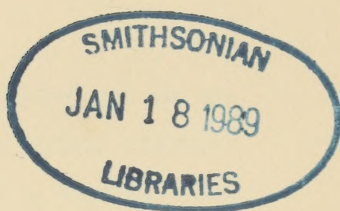
THE HAUNT OF THE SNIPE.

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Birds

Ogilvie B. Graham.

A BOOK OF

THE SNIPE



BY

"SCOLOPAX"
'''

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

MCMIV

1904

STORRS L. OLSON

PREFACE.

THIS little book is not intended as an exhaustive book of instruction either scientific or sporting. It is merely a reprint, with additions, of sundry papers jotted down in the rare idle hours of a busy life. These papers having, I am told, amused many in the pages of 'Maga,' may perhaps amuse more when collected in booklet form. If they should do for the reader the kindness which they performed for the writer—namely, that of bringing a whiff from the snipe-haunted marshes into the stuffy prison of everyday life in parlour and street—"Scolopax" will feel that he has at any rate done some one a good turn, and nobody any harm.

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A BOOK OF THE SNIPE.

INTRODUCTORY.

IF the amusements of men are as varied as their trades, they are often as exacting, and seldom so well managed. To replace one frown by another is commonly all that a holiday does for far too many people nowadays. Something of the bitter competition as well as the hurry of business seems to have invaded the sacred hours of idleness; the last of the Lotophagi will soon have vanished from our midst. Though we have more leisure than we used to have, though we spend more money, and generally cherish ourselves more, nevertheless we seem sadder folk. Anxious brows and weary eyes grow more common in

the streets. Peace of soul has evidently not kept pace with solicitude for the body, and the loud laugh which speaks the vacant mind is so rarely heard that some of us are beginning to realise mournfully how jolly a sound it was.

Sport—by which I mean the chase of flesh or fowl, or even of good red-herring in the shape of a “drag,”—sport is the best yeast of life, the most certain specific to keep our bodies from becoming doughy and our spirits dumpish. No other form of amusement possesses quite the same power of taking a man out of that most undesirable groove, himself. It is the best business for the idler, the finest idling for the busy. How many of the former has it not saved from perdition, and to what multitudes in the grip of a plague of thinking has its very thoughtlessness not proved the only medicine?

A man who does actually nothing all his days but hunt or shoot or fish, though he may be very properly despised, can yet be no bad kind of drone, for his very loafing has in it something of the nobility of dis-

cipline both mental and physical. He is probably a sound piece of human machinery to begin with; his eye is clear and his hand steady, and he has acquired the gift of making them work in unison, than which no art or craft soever, from sculpture to lace-making, demands more. Nor can the brain of a sportsman, though it ponder over nothing but sport, be, as is commonly supposed by those who ponder over nothing but business, like that of the "fool in the forest,"

"As dry as the remainder biscuit
After a voyage."

It is a case of "who rules o'er freemen must himself be free." Wits whose daily occupation it is to outwit the quickest wits on earth, those of the harried game beasts of these over-hunted islands, cannot be contemptible. To them some of the rarest and most valuable of human qualities become an instinct. "Making up one's mind," for instance: to but one man in a hundred belongs the gift of countering a pressing emer-

gency or problem with a device or solution as sudden as itself. That adequate hundredth man will have his will against adversaries far more formidable in other respects than himself, and he is to be found more often in the ranks of sportsmen than in any other of the battalions which make up the army of life.

For a day's sport is but a series of decisions, most of them instantaneous. The deer-stalker must take his shot, or the chance will fly quicker than the bullet from his rifle. The rider to hounds must mark the exit to the field whilst yet in the air above the fence which lets him into it, otherwise he will get "pounded," and forfeit his run. The fisherman's brain must send the message to his hand to strike or not to strike, gaff or not gaff, with speed as incalculable as the rush of a telegram along the wires: the hesitation of the duration of the tick of a watch may lose him the twenty pounds of live silver flashing beneath the bubbly surface of the salmon-pool.

Then, again, who but the sportsman is so constantly tested and practised in the vital art of making what in India is called a *bandobast*, a plan for the day's operations, involving the solution of goodness knows how many problems of time and space, of cheating the wind or the sun, of following this, that, or the other road or beat or line of country? These are small matters, but they hold the essence of the very biggest matter that occupies mankind. War, the apotheosis, or if you will the uttermost degradation, of sport, considered from many points of view is also the highest of human sciences, for it deals with the very existence of men, not only with their comfort or progress. At its stern apparition all other arts fly in terror, and watch trembling from their hiding-places the demeanour of the men on whose skill or folly depends the duration of their exile. A nation whose battles are fought by blunderers may lose much more than the lives of her soldiers.

That a good sportsman has the makings

of a good soldier has become such a commonplace that in the minds of most people he will make nothing else. But this is half a truth run mad. All life is a war; "there is much enemy," as one of Kipling's Indian heroes remarked, in every enterprise; the lessons which form *par excellence* the curriculum of sport are as invaluable to the banker or lawyer as to the soldier. Little traits show the air of the wind of character. Napoleon first displayed his quality in the storming of fortresses of snow, and surely something of the austere pertinacity of his great adversary is deducible from his eternal order for breakfast—"cold meat at dawn."¹ Conversely, were I a general, I would not intrust the leadership of even a squad to a man I observed to be fussy about crossing Piccadilly Circus. The little traits which

¹ This was Wellington's invariable answer to the aide-de-camp whose duty it was to inquire of the Duke at what hour he would breakfast next day, and what he would eat. An amusing tale is told of the disgust of a lie-a-bed Belgian general who, loving French cooking, had to spend a penitential month in attendance on the Spartan Duke.

constitute a good sportsman all tend one way—to the formation of a character to be depended upon wherever swiftness, decision, and forethought are wanted in the graver sport of life.

Having thus, I hope, vindicated the dignity of sport in general, I come with an easier mind to that fascinating branch of a branch of it which will form the subject of these rambling reflections—*i.e.*, snipe-shooting.

To the real shooting enthusiast all shooting is good, but some is better than others. Any form of sport that brings his favourite weapon into use is welcome. But everybody acknowledges that some particular bird or beast appeals particularly to his sporting instinct as an object of pursuit. It may be because of its beauty, or because of its scarcity; perhaps because there is great toil and difficulty in finding and outwitting it, or because, on the other hand, the favoured game has its residence in plain-sailing sort of ground and conditions. It may be again because of the mere physical adroitness required to hit

it with a charge of shot, or *vice versa* because its flight or gait renders it a prey to a possibly limited amount of skill. It may be for a hundred other reasons ; but the fact remains that nearly every lover of the gun, and the sport it brings, loves to swing it on to the departing form of one or other of the delightful beings included in the term "game" above any of the rest.

I do not at all mean to say that the pleasure in every sort of shooting is less because we may have a shooting *protégé* (if that can be called a *protégé* in the destruction of which we are chiefly interested) ; it is only that in the pursuit of the instinctively selected quarry it is more. There is pleasure in every fair method of bringing game to hand with a gun, and very often even the specialist is forced to confess that he has had ecstatic moments in quite other branches of shooting that made him forget his specialism.

That wild quarter of an hour at the bottom of the coombe in the covert, for instance, when H., who thought himself im-

pervious to the delights of dropping any feathered thing less untamed than the wild-geon from farthest north, took the measure of a stream of pheasants gliding still-winged but at express-train speed across the narrow slit of sky seen between the dense tree-tops above. As he dealt certain death to each of those outstretched heads darting from the dark line of foliage out against the blue of the heavens, only to throw up and drop as if they had dashed into an invisible wall, flight-shooting was forgotten for the moment. So too with J., whose forte is rabbits,—rabbits in thousands, miraculously snapped up from the hip or from any position for which their lightning scurry from hole to hole gives time. He felt far from dull yesterday, when, standing well back from the high hedge, he cracked down the driven partridges whizzing over him like cricket-balls from the bat of Jessop—now in front, now overhead, now with a jump round behind, until his bewildered loader gave up trying to remember how many were down.

No! it can be said again, thankfully, that there is pleasure in all and every form of shooting, so that I do not expect every one to agree with me when I assert that snipe-shooting is the best of all—the zenith, the highest form of the art and pleasure derivable from the use of the shot-gun. I confess to being an enthusiast, but a little avowed enthusiasm is not a bad thing in these days of *nil admirari*. Many men are too busy acquiring the means of pleasure to have time to enjoy the pleasures themselves. Many are too much possessed with the pose of self-restraint to exhibit any of those little weaknesses which are the salt of the earth to those not ashamed to own to them. So I had better, perhaps, attempt a short justification of my particular fondness for snipe-shooting, to instil which into the reader, if he has it not already, will be the object of these humble chapters.

It is presumed that the reader is at least fond of shooting generally. If he is not, he had better lay down these pages at once,

for he will be only sadly bored with their contents. If he *is* fond of shooting, and might be fondest of all of snipe-shooting, if he had ever been told enough about it to make him try his hand at it, he may not be disinclined to consider the few reasons I am about to tender that seem to me best to indicate fascinations which after all are more readily felt than described.

In the first place, then, the utter wildness of the snipe must appeal to the true sportsman. What a mysterious little fellow he is! Who can tell whence he comes and whither he so constantly goes? How sudden his silent coming in the night, his no less imperceptible flittings from the moor where yesterday a hundred of his relations screamed and zigzagged as we floundered through it. To-morrow he may be back from his journey to heaven knows where, and every tussock of rush and grass will again shelter his neat little figure from the east wind. He is nobody's property, but on the other hand owns a fine strong pair of wings which whisk

him over from the *tundras* of Siberia, when his larder is frozen there, in time for a late dinner amid the warmth and worms of the temperate zone. He is the most vagrant, most irresponsible of feathered creatures, and only the mighty Master, the weather, has anything to say to his goings on, and those of his big cousins and travelling companions, the wild geese and the widgeon.

Then how beautiful he is. From the top of his gamey, tapered head to the soles of his delicate feet he is a perfect little gentleman to look at, thoroughbred in every line of him. On the wing he only condescends to show you the flash of his white waistcoat, and perhaps a fleeting glance at his slim bill silhouetted against the sky. But take him in your hand if you are lucky or clever enough to hit him. His back and wings are an artistic triumph of warm browns and cool creams, which are in absolute harmony with the snowy white of his breast and the black bars which relieve his flanks. If you are a fisherman, you will be able to detect the

filmy hackles which have helped you to many a fat grayling, and you will love him all the more. Even if you are nothing but an epicure, *venter et præterea nihil*, you cannot but admire the fair setting of the dainty morsel which the everlasting moorlands have given you, and you must confess that he is worth more than a glance before you send him off to the cook. He will taste all the better on his savoury plinth of brown toast because you have seen the russet symphony that once clothed his plump and tender form.

Another attraction he has is the extreme difficulty of shooting him. No man need ever sigh for worlds to conquer with his gun. As long as he lives he will never be complete master of the situation when snipe are on the wing. He may kill his four out of five one day, but it is a red-letter day, and he had better make the most of it. The memory of it alone may remain to sustain him through many succeeding occasions when *Gallinago* will get up shouting

cheerfully at him just ten yards too far time after time ; or if for fun he allow a nearer approach, will bounce up with a squeak that says as plainly as possible, "Bo ! to a goose !" only to spurt off up wind, six inches from the ground, at a pace that even Schultze doesn't seem able to keep up with. He is an expert at dodging, darting, gyrating, shaving banks, nipping around corners, describing aërial figures of eight, and of all the *haute école* of "flightmanship" generally. He delights in letting you know how little you know. The wind is strong ; he must, you reason, and the books tell you, breast the gale before he can master it and you. So it is obviously the correct thing to walk for him down wind, for then he will throw up on rising, and offer a fair and pleasing shot. Does he oblige you ? Not he ! He does, it is true, give the slightest jump into the breeze, and is off like an erratic bullet at an initial velocity of 30 yards a second. If you can take advantage of that transitory leap, you are a good snipe-

shot, and books of instruction are not for you. It *can* be done, and in the doing of it with the incredible swiftness necessary, and its infinite variations of position, elevation, surroundings, &c., lies the whole pleasure of the sport.

Nay! not the whole pleasure. Even if Mr Snipe beats you every time, until you distrust your trusty gun, and curse the maker of the cartridges you secretly know to be perfectly correct, until you call yourself names for having been such a fool as to bring your dog, or, being without one, blaspheme your folly in leaving him at home — even under these harrowing conditions there will still be a keen pleasure in the midst of your failure. There is the pleasure of the lonely moor, the monotonous grandeur of the sombre levels which are the snipe's chosen haunts. There is the ghostliness of the vast marshes, here and there shaking and quivering as if they knew not for certain which to be, earth or water, whose spell makes Bond Street

seem a teeming ant-heap of another sphere, so far away, so stuffy, and so undesirable does it appear. It seems an insult to bring your ejector and your smart Norfolk jacket into these solitudes, where the curlew rears its young, and the water-rail, shyest of slinking creatures, flaps up painfully at your feet.

Failing these, there is the pleasure in the failure itself. Despite your ejector, you cannot hit those snipe, and you won't until you get the London fog out of your eyes, and the "slows" from the arms underneath that Norfolk jacket. But one day perhaps you will, if you are not blind or incurably stiff, suddenly find that hand and eye have entered into partnership with your gun at last. You will have acquired that undefinable sixth sense, the "knack." Crack! you have snapped him to the earth almost before he had time to scream. Bang! A long left barrel has crumpled his brother like a rag in the air, to fall with a splash into a pool. You have scored your first right and left at snipe.

You may do it again a hundred times, you will certainly fail thrice that number; but the memory of that first success, like that of the first time you sat firm over an ox-fence, will remain with you for ever with its joy, and the utter impossibility of remembering exactly how you did it. No matter, you *have* done it; and unless you are of more than common clay, I wager that thereafter you will be a snipe-shooter at heart, even if circumstances prevent your travelling annually to the moors and marshland. When the pheasants are soaring overhead, or the partridges are buzzing away like big brown bees, your thoughts will be with that little game bird who teased and tormented you until the art of stopping him came to you as suddenly as one of his own sudden flashes.

Finally, I must plead for our little friend an advantage which in these hard times only the lucky ones of the earth can afford to despise—his cheapness. He costs nothing to produce and nothing to keep. He is the

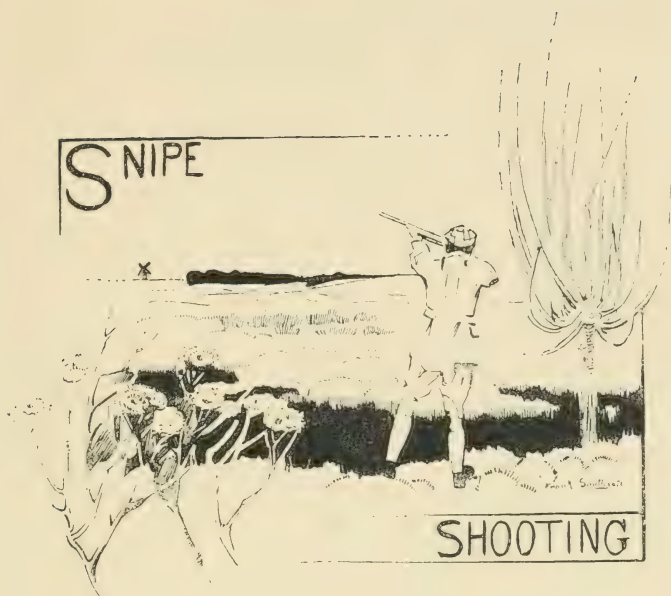
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STORRS L. OLSON

free gift of Nature from her countless store of living creatures which she takes very good care to hide away in the fastnesses of her great nursery, the North. You cannot buy his eggs or his chicks at so much a dozen, to be coddled and incubated until they are ready to be the prey of shooters who have tended them from their youth up. You cannot boast of the numbers you have of him in your preserves, and tell your friends in your letter of invitation how many cartridges they are likely to require. Let 'em bring as many as they can carry; they may have to bear home the identical number, or, on the other hand, to send a man hot-foot for more. You didn't "put so many birds down," and heaven knows how many the fates will let you take up. If you carry back a holocaust or but a solitary jack on your snipe-sticks, be grateful in either case. Your pocket is no lighter, and no one can lay to your charge the disappointment of a poor show of birds, any more than they can thank you for profusion.

At the close of many an enjoyable walk after snipe I have been thankful that these overcrowded islands still contain a few square miles of sodden useless land—useless, that is, to anything or any one but the jolly little bird and the mortal to whom it affords his favourite sport. Alas! the unreclaimed tracts are getting fewer and fewer every year. Ominous wooden pegs, the outposts of railways to follow, are being driven in where once lay four mottled eggs, the pride of their long-billed mother, who has flown for ever to seek quiet nurseries elsewhere, far from the hideous proximity of engineering mankind. Cultivation, the birth of prosperity but the death of wild sport, is encroaching yard by yard on the moorlands which our fathers probably thought eternal. It would be useless and wrong to complain. There are more important claims than snipe-shooting on the empty acres. But it is impossible not to mourn the gradual disappearance of our beloved solitudes before the irresistible advance of science and agriculture.

However, the time is not yet, thank goodness, when every flock of snipe from the North, prospecting for comfortable winter quarters, will be forced to stream away from these shores, their long noses turned up in disgust at the universal alternation of machinery and cabbage-garden, where once the only sign of man was the infrequent and welcome spade of the peat-cutter. Great Britain is not yet *all* reclaimed, nor is it likely to be during our lifetime, so away with dismal thoughts into the *Ewigkeit*, in which a snipe will be as curious a relic to our volapuk-speaking posterity as the Great Auk is to us, and a book on how to shoot it prized as a quaint treatise on a forgotten sport. *Carpe diem*; let us go out shooting to-day anyhow, and if we see a signal-box defiling the spot which last year was a certain lie for a jack, we will take shares in the railway company, and be off with the dividends to shoot snipe in other climes.



CHAPTER I.

SNIPE.

SNIPE belong, natural - historically speaking, to the order of *Grallæ* (stilt-legged birds), the family of *Scolopacidæ* (sharpened like a stake), and the sub-family of *Gallinago* (hen-like). They belong, further, to that branch of the *Carinatae* (birds with pointed breast-

bones) whose members rejoice in a two-forked division of the tract of feathers running along the spine, as distinguished from the uninterrupted line of spinal feathering which characterises other orders. Formidable statistics, indeed, for species averaging some four ounces of fat and feathers!

Their biggest connection is thus the monstrous Adjutant of the avine army of India, a choleric officer who swallows legs of mutton whole, and roars like Typhœus when enraged; their smallest relation is a member of their own immediate circle, the tiny Jack-Snipe. Unlike many other gentlemen of pedigree, snipe are one and all monogamous.

Of the score of species which compose the sub-family, but four have ever been obtained in Great Britain, viz. :—

- (i) The Great or Double Snipe (*Gallinago major*).
- (ii) The Common or Full-Snipe (*G. gallinaria*).
- (iii) The Jack-Snipe (*G. gallinula*).
- (iv) The Red-Breasted Snipe (*G. griseus*).

Of these the Red-Breasted Snipe, a North American bird, is of such extreme rarity that for the purposes of this book it may be altogether ignored, more especially as its habits are rather those of the gregarious shore-waders than of the solitary and more sporting denizens of the marshes. Another species, the Great Snipe, might also be almost disregarded in a book intended for the use of snipe-shooters rather than for snipe-students, for, though a regular visitor to these shores, it will seldom if ever be seen by the winter sportsman. However, since he is the head and the largest of the old and exclusive British family to which he belongs, this little Debrett of the Snipes would be very incomplete without some description of the Great Snipe. Moreover, it is quite possible that he will be met with on his short autumnal visit to these islands at least once or twice in a shooting lifetime; met with, indeed, very possibly more often than recognised by grouse and partridge shooters, whose eyes, all alert

for bigger quarry, this unassuming and soberly clad head of his clan may escape altogether.

The GREAT SNIPE, then, is a bird varying from $6\frac{1}{2}$ to $10\frac{1}{2}$ ounces in weight, measuring about 12 inches long from beak-tip to tail-end, and some 18 inches from tip to tip of its expanded wings. Its form and colour may be best described for the sportsman's purposes by their differences from those of the Common Snipe. Generally speaking, besides being larger it has a more burly appearance than its smaller congener: its legs are shorter in comparison to its body; its beak is shorter ($2\frac{1}{2}$ inches); the Full-Snipe had better fortune at the Promontory of Noses,¹ no small matter for birds who get their living by boring in the mud; its tail is a trifle squarer, and redresses the Nosarian balance by boasting sixteen feathers as against fourteen flirted by the Full-Snipe. In colour, too, there is a distinguishable, though in young birds somewhat indistinct, difference. In the Full-Snipe

¹ The Tale of Slawkenbergius in 'Tristram Shandy.'

the breast is whiter than Belinda's; the front of the Great Snipe is more dusky, yellowish and brownish, banded with darker browns and blacks. In compensation again, however, the Great Snipe displays in his tail eight white outer feathers, four on each side, which in the Full-Snipe are barred with brown and black, and when he flies takes care to display the justice of Nature by spreading his tail to the utmost, thus appearing from behind nearly as white as the Full-Snipe does from before. In the young bird these feathers are much darker, but they have always more white than those of the Full-Snipe. Other means of identification are the silence of the bird as it rises (a Full-Snipe invariably "ptchakes"), and its comparatively clumsy flight, very different from the arrowy career of the commoner species. The Great Snipe greatly resembles, indeed, an overgrown Jack-Snipe on the wing, and may sometimes share with that little flutterer the safety attributable to the sudden effect of the slowness of its flight upon the sportsman's eye

and hand, which have grown accustomed for years to dealing with the flash of brown lightning of the Common Snipe. I only once flushed a Great Snipe, and the recollection of how I sent two charges of shot the length of a church *in front* of it, never to see the bird again, is to this day, to misquote Wordsworth,

“The memory of Earth’s bitter leaven
Effaced never.”

The Great Snipe has never nested in the British Islands, Holland being the nearest point at which it breeds. It is but an autumn coasting migrant, a few individuals turning aside from the great flights which skirt our shores on their way southward from Northern Europe in September and October. It is, however, a perfectly regular visitor, and must therefore be considered a genuinely British bird : the numbers of occurrences of its being shot by autumn sportsmen are far too numerous to record individually. I have heard of but few specimens being seen or obtained later than October, and probably these were

birds which had been so seriously wounded or otherwise injured in the autumn as to make them unable or unwilling to face the fatigues of a long over-sea flight—a circumstance which has been also noted occasionally in connection with the Jack-Snipe, a bird which, never breeding in this country, has yet been found at rare intervals in the breeding season.

The Great Snipe differs in its habitat from its other British relations in that it affects dry in preference to marshy ground, though it will never be found far from water. The bird I flushed rose from low furze, but long grass, heather, and bracken are its usual resting-places. It may be expected rather in the eastern counties than elsewhere, but will be a prize wherever obtained. The sportsman is recommended to examine carefully every individual bird he carries home with him on his snipe-stick. Otherwise he may let a treasure go, as the old lady did, who in her husband's absence one day sold to a passing pedlar an arm-chair which her

good man had been stuffing secretly with bank-notes for forty years! There *may* be a Great Snipe on your stick any day. A friend of mine once rescued one from a bundle of snipe exposed for sale in a poulterer's shop, and possibly many a specimen which might have adorned a smoking-room or the local museum has lain with the *profanum vulgus* upon the common bier of toast on the dinner-table.

THE COMMON or FULL-SNIPE weighs from $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 6 ounces, the usual weight of a healthy bird being about $4\frac{3}{4}$ ounces; the usual length about $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and the width across the wings about 16 inches; length of beak $2\frac{3}{4}$ to 3 inches. It is one of the commonest birds in the world. Did not civilisation clash with its habits and destroy its habitat it would probably be the commonest of all birds. There is no country in which it does not either breed or to which it does not resort on migration. As the fisherman on travel bent will never do wrong to carry with him a spinning-rod, a Nottingham reel,

and some artificial minnows,—there being predatory fish in all the waters of the globe,—so the shooter about to wander on a foreign strand will always be safe with a light twelve-bore gun and No. 8 shot. From the land of the ostrich to that of the brent-goose, from the sweltering tropic to the bleak tundra, snipe will follow his footsteps and he may follow the snipe. In Great Britain it is both a resident and a migrant visitor, though the numbers which remain to breed are insignificant compared to those which arrive at these shores on migration. Quiet, lonely swamps, such as the birds require for their nursery, are few in number in this land of precious acres; but wherever they are, there, concealed in dry tufts raised above the level of the ooze, will most likely be the little grass-lined cups which the bird excavates for its nest, with the three or four (very rarely five) disproportionately large eggs ($1\frac{1}{2}$ inch long by 1 inch 1 line broad), greenish-white in colour, mottled, chiefly at the thicker end, with different shades of brown.

The troubles of the mother snipe are short. Finding her mate at the earliest in mid-February, or at latest in the first week of April, her eggs are laid soon after the middle of March or before the middle of May. Five weeks later they are broken by the chicks, which, like modern politicians, spring from the shell able to do everything just as well as their parents, except to fly.

During the period of courtship the birds, both cock and hen, begin to make a sound so different from their ordinary shrill cry that any one hearing it for the first time is apt to be as startled and as incredulous as to its origin as he would be were he to hear some famous operatic prima-donna suddenly open the song of Elsa in "Lohengrin" in a deep bass! Naturalists have long been puzzled both as to the cause and how best to describe this strange sound which rings through the air above the marshes in the early spring days—a sound so loud, so unlocatable, and so bizarre that it seems impossible that it can have been uttered by a bird one-twelfth the

weight of a pheasant hovering high in the heavens. As to the sound itself, only recent years have rendered a simile possible. Nothing resembles so nearly the love-song of the snipe as the vibrant hum of a motor-car travelling smoothly and at speed along the road! And as to the cause, it has been ascertained almost beyond a doubt that the noise is simply that made by the wind rushing swiftly upwards between the stiffer feathers of the wings as the bird lets itself drop head foremost through space, its pinions half contracted, so that the under portion is arched into a kind of sounding-board and made to shiver rapidly. Whether this tremulousness is the result of muscular action or of the rapid upward draught of the air must remain insoluble until Mr Maxim has enabled the ornithologist to include a flying machine, on which to accompany the snipe during his operatic performance, amongst his ordinary paraphernalia. It is undoubtedly the vibration of these feathers, as they cut slantwise down through the resisting air, which

produces the sound so exactly imitated by the four motor cylinders pulsating a thousand times a minute on the man-made flier of the highroad.

There is no situation more uncanny than a marsh resounding with the throbbing of the snipe before the break of day. I well remember the uneasiness of a little spaniel I once took out to assist at the morning flight of duck from a lonely mere to their day haunt, a protected bay of an island off the coast of Ireland. On this particular morning I was far too early, and had to sit upon my bundle of sodden reeds a full hour before the first smell of the morning came to warn the fowl to quit their midnight pastures. But during that hour the snipe woke up and began one by one to drum to each other in the darkness,¹ until soon a thousand gloomy rumblings filled the air, sometimes from a height, sometimes apparently within a few inches of where the

¹ This was on a certain February 14, the earliest date on which I have ever heard the drumming of the snipe.

dog and I crouched in silence. If ever terror, *superstitious* terror, was visible in an animal's face, it was upon that of that small spaniel! Flat went his tail; and as the light grew, I could see his eyes rolling almost inside out, whilst he whimpered and chattered his teeth so loudly that, shaking with suppressed laughter myself, I was forced to hold his muzzle to prevent his alarming the duck, which I knew were floating silently but alert on the mere just glinting close ahead. Such a chorus of snipe I had never heard myself; it seemed as if the roar rising and falling must be heard for ten miles. Apparently it sounded the morning bugle for the duck, at any rate, for soon, easily distinguishable amidst the humming overhead, came the rapid fanning of heavy wings, and a little clump of fowl coming like shadows, so departed into the gloom before I could grasp my gun. A pause, and another drift of birds. Crash! went the 8-bore, thump! thump! a brace of two-pound mallard fell like projectiles; the drumming of the snipe ceased like

an organ suddenly deprived of air, and the little dog, recovering his composure at the comfortable roar of the gun, raced off to pick up the slain, forgetting his fears as completely as a girl after a nervous, ghostly night does at the breakfast-table! But all his life he never failed to tremble at the sound of drumming snipe; nor do I ever hear it myself without recalling with a lump in the throat the affectionate little companion of many bitter winter dawns on marsh and mere, and even on the ocean itself. *Eheu! cheu!* There are bitter moments in life, but I want none more bitter than that in which, after three years of being shot at instead of shooting in the sport called war, I returned to greet my little spaniel, now grown dodderly and blind, and, less fortunate than Ulysses, found that I was *not* recognised.

Migrant snipe arrive at these shores in small numbers in August, a few more in September, the great bulk in October and November—departing northward again sparingly in February, very numerous in March,

less again in April, the last stragglers leaving in May. There is, however, a large temporary accession to the strength of British snipe in the shape of the flocks which, travelling from other countries, coast and alight upon our shores both in the spring and autumn migrations. Thus in March, and again in October and November, there are numbers of birds about which have spent neither the winter nor the summer respectively with us, which are using Great Britain merely as a half-way house to northern or southern climes. Whether the birds which have been actually bred in this country migrate out of it when full grown—*i.e.*, about the time of the first autumn arrivals from abroad—is a disputed point. It seems almost certain that they do so, however, for, other evidence apart, were it otherwise, one of the strongest characteristic instincts of their tribe, that of wintering south of their breeding-place, would be subverted, a very unlikely state of things. Throughout the year, then, there is a kind of “general post” in progress

amongst the snipe, though how far Box, the home-bred bird, contrives to avoid encountering Cox, the foreign migrant; whether Box, assuming that he does evacuate the British marshes, ever returns, like a salmon, *in propria persona* to breed in a remembered haunt; or whether his place is taken for the next breeding-season by members of the outgoing Cox family, who are disinclined for travel,—these things are as yet beyond the ken of man, though there are many men of diametrically opposite opinions who are positive upon each and all of these points.

Migration, the most fascinating problem in all nature, is still the unsolved x of ornithology. Something we know, something we learn every day, but shall we ever know in their entirety the laws which govern the movements of those vast armies of birds which sweep in all directions across the oceans, apparently as ungoverned as the winds themselves, yet each pursuing a track which was perhaps adopted before man first stirred in the womb of Nature; still following to-day

a primeval valley or mountain - range now hidden hundreds of fathoms deep beneath the sea ; crossing blindly the widest portions of ocean, because once upon a time a narrow strait made the dangerous passage across blue water as short as possible ; on the other hand, steering for that headland, because the old bluff stood there in the dawn of the world precisely as it does to-day, a landmark for a million little round eyes, weary from travel, as it has been for a million years ?

The seasons themselves are more explicable than the movements of the mobs of birds which shift and sway with them about the globe, peopling empty branches, thickets, and rushes with innumerable forms of beauty, making them resonant with innumerable little voices, without which they would be strangely deserted and silent. Nor is migration less mysterious in that it teaches us something of the extravagance as well as the generosity of Nature. The "wastage" of an army in the field, enormous as it is, is a trifle compared to the appalling loss of life which thins the

ranks of migrating birds. If scientists may be believed, the thousands that reach us are but survivors of tens and hundreds of thousands which the tempest, the sea, fog, fatigue, and predatory enemies have struck down on the way until the track of migration is marked by a line of corpses.

The food of the snipe, though in captivity it has been known to swallow raw flesh, consists of worms, caterpillars, and small snails. These it obtains by boring deeply in the mud with its long bill, so deeply that you will sometimes observe the forehead and even the eyes of birds you may shoot to be caked with dry mud. There is no doubt that a snipe becomes aware of the presence of a worm or other edible below the surface of the ground chiefly by the sense of hearing, and that he locates it more exactly by feeling. I have often watched snipe at dinner, and have observed that, though they make many fruitless borings in their search for food, only one in about half-a-dozen efforts being rewarded with a worm, the successful "drill" was invariably

preceded by a somewhat prolonged pause, during which the bird stood with head lowered and cocked on one side in an attitude of listening, just as you may see a rook doing in a field. What chance has the floundering sportsman of escaping detection by a bird to which the stirring of a worm two inches deep in mud is audible! For the purpose of feeling the morsel invisible below the surface, the extremity of the snipe's bill is furnished with a netted bulb of nerves compared to which the human tongue is but a dull clod for sensitiveness. Only the elephant with his forty thousand trunk muscles can compare with the snipe in delicacy of nose, so that the mighty pachyderm and the tiny bird meet on the ground of extremities as well as extremes!

Unlike the woodcock, the snipe is believed never to feed from the surface, even when starving in a frost; indeed it is doubtful whether he could do so rapidly enough to keep himself in condition, owing to the length and awkward shape of his bill. Yet

a snipe is never so fat as during the first few days of a frost! Many learned brows have frowned over this anomaly, and many ingenious suggestions been made to account for it. Sir Humphry Davy himself spared time from his task of discovering the elements of Creation to think out the reason why a little bird got fat when it should have got thin, and arguing professor-wise from effect back to causes, judged that it must be because a snipe in a frost only resides by springs which, being too warm to freeze, would have worms in plenty about them at all times; wherein I believe that the great philosopher was partly right. Gilbert White's of Selborne attribution of the extra flesh of snipe to the "gentle check which the cold throws upon insensible perspiration" (Letter V.) I believe to be wholly fanciful, though it has been adopted by many naturalists. Probably the true reason is a habit noticeable in many animals, man included, of gorging to repletion whenever there appears a probability of scarcity of food in

the future. During a long campaign in which I once took part, it used to be amusing to notice what vast amounts of food the soldiers would stow away at their infrequent meals, far more than sufficient to appease the hunger of the moment, because, as they said, "you never knew when you were going to get any more!" I believe it to be the same with the snipe, whose foreknowledge of future climatic conditions must be, from his very migratory habits, an instinct. Like the provident soldier, he "stokes" as hard as he can before the frost actually descends upon him, firstly in his ordinary haunts, next at the springs which remain open when the colder ground is frost-bound. Thus he waxes fat, and primed with blubber, like the gorged Esquimau, to withstand two or three days of privation, astonishes the sportsman by his portliness in a time of scarcity of food. But "worm-eries" around the springs are not inexhaustible; indeed they must be very quickly depleted, judging from the multitudinous

birds you may spring from them early in a frost, for snipe are voracious feeders. Then when the springs are wormless and the frost continues, the snipe fly to warmer pastures (often not far in this climatic patch-work of ours) if they have retained strength for flight; if not, they perish. In a long frost you may shoot birds so weak as to be scarcely able to fly, and so thin as to be utterly useless for the table, if you are unsportsmanlike enough to do so. This is not, however, a common occurrence in these islands, for our frosts are usually as brief as our spells of warm weather, and even when they occur the snipe are not often caught napping. On the subject of frosts more will be said later.

Two varieties of the Common Snipe have been obtained in Great Britain, a black and white. Whilst both are exceedingly rare, the former has occurred sufficiently commonly to have received from naturalists, who for long regarded it as a distinct species, the specific designation of Sabine's Snipe. Curi-

ously enough, though snipe abound all over the globe, this beautiful melanistic variety has seldom (never, I believe, properly authenticated) been observed outside these islands. It differs in no respect from the ordinary bird save in colour, which is very dark brown, barred with black, without a trace of white either on the breast or elsewhere.

The white bird has occurred so excessively seldom that there may be something in the old Mohammedan legend that in that guise the souls of the departed just await admission to Paradise!

The JACK-SNIPE, though far from being a rare bird, is much more local in its distribution than its larger relative. In many parts where the latter abound it is regarded as quite a rarity, whilst, on the other hand, I know of places in the British Islands where the proportion of Jacks to Full-Snipe is not less than as two to three. Your bag of Jacks, however, after many years of snipe-shooting in all parts of Great Britain, will probably average a fifth or even less, of the whole.

Jack-Snipe are pure migrants. No specimen has ever been known to breed in these islands, though reports of the discovery of their nests are regular hardy annuals of ornithological fallacies. A few individual birds, as previously mentioned, *have* been seen late in the spring, but, like the appearance of a dandy in St James Street in August, the circumstance has been owing to some special and abnormal reason. The birds breed in northern latitudes, their most northerly limit, in Scandinavia and Siberia, being one degree more northerly than that of the Full-Snipe. Did not creatures still more frail—*e.g.*, the tits—astonish us by the distances of their migration, it would seem impossible for a pair of wings so feeble to carry their owner across the perils of hundreds of miles. Still more surprising is it when we find the bird to be of so sluggish and indolent a nature that the discharge of guns, the shouting of sportsmen, and the bustling of dogs will scarcely induce it to fly a dozen yards even if unwounded, often, indeed, failing altogether to stir it after its first perfunctory

flight. What a mysterious instinct is that which hurries this atom of creation through nights of travel, with the stormy northern ocean tossing beneath, and almost everything in the world more powerful than itself, save only its determination to win its harbour. To me the bellowing of a volcano is a less impressive manifestation of the mastery of God than the steadfastness of this puny bird.

Jack-Snipe begin to arrive in this country in September, the bulk, however, in the two following months; the first departures being in February, trebling in March, and fading again in April, the last stragglers leaving early in May.

If they migrate in bodies, as is most probable, though I believe no eye has seen them on their travels, they discard their sociability immediately on alighting on dry ground, living hermit-wise in silence and solitude each in his little tuft. I have watched for hours, nay days, patches of grass which I knew contained Jack-Snipe, and never once have seen them communicate one with another in any way

whatever; whereas the springing of a Full-Snipe with his metallic cry would usually draw one or two others from the ground to join him for a moment in an aërial dance.

The Jack-Snipe is a beautiful little bird. There is upon the long feathers of his back a violet bloom which would canonise M. Worth could he work it into silks and satins for human Jills to fascinate *their* Jacks withal. This gloss, though never entirely absent, becomes brighter as the spring approaches, not attaining its full beauty until the Jacks have departed for their northern breeding-grounds.

From the *gourmet's* point of view they are even more delicious than the Common Snipe, having a delicate flavour, so subtle as to be almost an aroma, which is lacking in the larger bird, excellent though that is. Jack-Snipe, moreover, for some inscrutable reason, never become thin, even in prolonged frosts. "The 'old hand,'" therefore, says Colonel Hawker, "keeps the Jack for his own eating, and sends the fine-looking Full-Snipe to his friend!"

A Jack-Snipe is the only bird I know of at

which it is an advantage to *aim*. It is ten to one that a snap-shot will miss him, so tiny is he, and so vague in his flutterings. Whereas if you draw a steady bead on him, a thing anathema in all other branches of shooting, and follow him up and down with the muzzle of your gun, you will down every bird you meet in a day's walk, as I have done many a time in places where Jacks are numbered by dozens. The Jack-Snipe takes wing silently. Only once have I heard any sound from a rising bird, a clear pipe of a single note uttered but once.

The close season for snipe begins on March 1 and ends on August 1, they being for this purpose classed with wildfowl and not with game. Nevertheless the sportsman is required to take out a game licence before he may shoot them, snipe, like woodcock, being fair game for a riddle—When is a game-bird not a game-bird? Answer, When it's a snipe!



CHAPTER II.

SOME HAUNTS OF THE SNIPE.

I NOW propose to accompany the reader on a "snipe-walk," for the express purpose of ascertaining some of the haunts where it may reasonably be expected to find birds at any time. I say "expected," for any more definite word might involve me in a responsibility I must decline to incur; and I say "some," because very likely, when you have

done with reading about snipe and have begun to shoot them, some of your very best sport may be had on occasion in places which do not bear the slightest resemblance to any I am about to depict.

Let us suppose it to be the first week in December,—for then our ground will hold nearly all the snipe it is likely to get for the winter,—the weather open, and the first frost of the year yet to come. As we are merely going on a reconnaissance of, and not an attack on, our little friend's position, we will go unarmed. Our object is to note the places from which birds spring, the numbers and the manner in which they do so, and, if possible, the spots on which they again alight. All this for future use.

Our starting-place is a rough bit of uncultivated land of about two acres not far from home, with a few tumble-down cottages on its borders. With the exception of a leet cut through its centre, whose waters work the mill below, the place is dry so far as we can see, and a cart-track running across it

looks as if it were too much used by man to be a spot favoured by the timid snipe in the day-time. And so it appears until, on the side farthest from the cottages, we come upon a shallow dip, which a leak in the leet has caused to be a bit sloppy. We almost tread upon a snipe before it jumps up, calling in alarm, from the withered grass which has evidently deadened our footsteps as well as afforded him shelter. It would have been a good start if we were on slaughter bent, for we could not well have missed him.

On going forward to the wet part to see if any marks of his bill can be found, a Jack flutters up from a tiny island of dry grass in the midst of a puddle, but drops again a few yards beyond. You will find both these birds here to-morrow, and if you shoot them both, others will most probably be there the day after, and every day, unless a drought dries up the moisture which is the attraction. We find no more birds in this place, and go on to where the common narrows into a grassy unused lane leading to the open wastes be-

yond. Over the high peat banks which shut it in are outlying farm-lands, and along its sides have grown up a fringe of rushes. Just the place for a terrified snipe to drop for a moment's shelter, and sure enough, just before we come to the end, up jumps a bird,—ten to one the fellow we flushed on the moor behind, which we saw flew in this direction. He sits just as well this time as before, and, we notice, makes his way back towards his original resting-place.

At the end of the lane we emerge on to a vast open stretch of moor and marsh, about seven miles in length and two in width, bounded on our right side by low hills, and on the left by a river of considerable size, to which various tributary streams run from the high ground. They are for the most part overgrown with vegetation, the water in some cases being altogether hidden. It is a dull lowering day, and the sombreness of the scene impresses, though it does not depress us; for do we not behold the chosen haunt of the mysterious little bird we hope to shoot in

hundreds on the very tract before us? It will be hard if birds are not to be found on some at least of the half-dozen different types of ground it includes. It would take a week to beat the place systematically, so we decide to walk straight through, keeping the river about half a mile on our left, intending to return along the lower slopes of the hills on our right.

Our walk towards the river is over an undulating expanse of short dead heather, with here and there a patch of young gorse, low but very dense. On certain days this would be a likely find for snipe; and in September, if that prize the Solitary Snipe were about, this would be the place to look for him. Wounded birds, too, are very apt to pitch amongst the gorse, from whence it takes a hard-bitten dog to retrieve them. To-day, however, we do not put up any snipe here, so pursue our way.

The going is getting perceptibly worse, and by the time we have reached our allotted distance from the river and turn our faces

up the valley, we begin to see what real snipe-ground is like. We are here on a level with the river, in some places indeed below it, and the intervening half-mile is one monotonous flat of long, scraggy water-grass, the considerable intervals between the stems occupied by soft but shallow mud. And now the fun begins. At every step snipe rise, for the most part pretty wild, though a good shot would be able to take fair toll of them. An occasional Jack flits away, and no doubt we leave many behind, which would be bagged if we had a dog to show us where they lurked.

After half a mile we arrive where a stream from the hills enters the main river through a perfect forest of reeds and rushes. A paddling of duck makes off at our approach, warned by the gruff voice of an old heron, who had certainly spotted us from the moment we entered the moor. The creek is too wide for us to cross here, so we must turn upstream until we find stepping-stones. But all that bright green weed that chokes the

river, like very tall water-cress in appearance, is almost sure to harbour a snipe or two, lying close, as they will in such a place. A big stone thrown with a splash confirms our supposition, and four or five birds spring up, one after the other, with just time to reload between, we think, though probably they would never come to bag without the aid of a good retriever, for they would have fallen into a place where no man could follow.

Across the stream the ground is of a slightly different character, though it is even more difficult to traverse. Looking ahead, we can see that about a mile farther on the river widens out into a large pool, or rather mere, as it is sufficiently extensive to stretch across our path. The space intervening between us and it is covered with thousands of bushy clumps of long grass, a regular archipelago in a sea of soft deep mud. We shall have to be careful here, for some of the narrow channels between the tussocks are neck-deep. However, the islands are so

close together that we should have no difficulty in stepping from one to the other. And what a multitude of snipe they shelter! Every tuft holds its bird, which displays a promising reluctance to being evicted from its little tenement. We will make a fine bag here to-morrow, especially of Jack-Snipe, though we shall have to pick them all up ourselves, as no dog could work properly in this network of muddy gutters. Notice how firm is the centre of each clump of grass—as hard as a pavement; but a mistake of an inch or two either way would land you into difficulties. We shall have to be about twice as careful as we are now, when carrying a loaded gun and looking out for shots.

And now we are approaching the lake, which is a perfect picture of gloomy solitude. All the same it is alive with living creatures, around, on it, in it; for right out in the centre can be seen a great company of what look like widgeon, and below them, they say, swims many a giant pike. We will take the latter on trust for the time being, and, judging

by the way the fowl huddle together, we shall not be able to make a much closer acquaintance with them either. See! they are off, with a mighty roar of wings. Stand perfectly still, and I wager they will pass right overhead, as we are very nearly in the wind's eye. So they do; but nothing smaller than a 4-bore would be equal to taking an elegant extract.

But we are neglecting our proper business, the snipe. I expect we shall find most amongst the scattered clumps of rushes that fringe the edge of the pool. It will be very wet walking out there, but anything for a relief from this tiring giant-stride business from tussock to tussock. Mind that circle of vivid green in front of you; a horse has been lost in there. It is a mud-hole that the folks hereabouts declare to be bottomless. Probably it is not that, though it is certainly deep enough to have completely swallowed up the unfortunate animal, who was no doubt attracted by the splendid colour of the growth over it. We give it a wide berth, but pass

near enough to alarm two or three snipe from their resting-place amongst the surrounding rushes, and to send a water-rail scuttling over the treacherous surface with as little difficulty as if it were the firmest of soil.

On the margin of the lake the going is bad indeed. Patches of rush and reed, separated by wide channels and creeks, are the chief characteristics of this essentially snikey tract of—one cannot say of ground, for there is more water than solid earth. No use attempting to walk dry-foot here—we must wade or nothing; and, believe me, it won't do us any harm, provided we change directly we get home, and don't lounge about in the meantime. And surely there is enough sport here to keep even the most timorous and chilly of mortals in a pleasant glow of excitement. The snipe are plentiful as blackberries, though I am afraid we should only be able to add a very small percentage to our bag. Walk as carefully as you will, you cannot help making as much splashing as a walrus through the shallow water, and it would be as much

use bringing a band of music as a dog to such ground. *Per contra*, we couldn't well do without a retriever, for nearly every bird skims out over the surface of the water, and if shot, would fall farther than it would be safe to follow. As I expected, the majority spring from the clumps of rush at the very edge of the water. Here, no doubt, they feel more secure than in more inland quarters, and, you will notice, allow a nearer approach than the birds we flushed on the way out. Even so, they are off soon enough to test your powers of shooting pretty severely, and you must not expect a very startling proportion of kills to cartridges at this spot.

It is not worth while following the border of the mere round to where it again contracts into the river-banks, so, as time is getting on, we will now turn our backs to it and cut straight across the moor to the foot of the low hills shutting it in on the other side. Leaving the quaggy ground immediately surrounding the water, from which snipe get up as we pass in undiminished numbers, we come

across a type of country unlike any we have yet traversed. The mud and rushes end abruptly, and give place to a long expanse of undulating open moor, covered with dead heath and grass, and, strange to say, with a vast number of boulders of various shapes and sizes. How they got here is a mystery, for there is no hill composed of similar rock, from which they might have rolled, for at least five miles. More important to us are those shallow square depressions half-filled with water that dot the plain between them on every side. These are the holes made by the peat-cutters, and wherever they occur snipe will be there or thereabouts, usually in the dry dead stuff around them in the daytime, or if very wet, on the sheltered side of the knolls. They lie like the rocks themselves here, goodness knows why, for the ground is more open than any we have walked over to-day, and they afford beautiful shots as they turn their white breasts to the wind, showing them up plainly against the dark monochrome of the herbage be-

neath. We should account for every bird here, but there are not many of them, and we see no Jack, although they are certain to be skulking in the dry clumps around the tiny puddles in the spade-holes.

The rolling plain is only about half a mile in length, and is bounded by a narrow stream, which for a short distance runs parallel to the line of hills from which it sprang. Before we cross it, it will be as well to take a look at the ground beyond, which is vastly different from that on which we are standing. Immediately across the water lies a small bog, covered with rushes so dense that no mud can be seen beneath, though here and there a faint dark strip, like the track of a dog in a field of standing corn, betrays the existence of an invisible rivulet. For a reason that we will presently put to practical proof, we will not take the trouble to-day of forcing our way through that waist-high thicket, though I know that it holds more snipe in its two or three acres than an equal number of square miles of any other portion

of our district. It is, in fact, a shaking rotten bog, and we shall probably take as good a census of its inhabitants from here as from anywhere else. If you stand here, keeping your eyes about the centre of the bog, I will jump the stream as heavily as I can, and you can note the result. No sooner said than done. What a storm of "ptchakes" greet the thump of my landing! More birds seem to leap up than the bog has inches. Off they go in a dozen wisps in all directions. There are enough snipe in the air to fill a waggon, but it is of no use gnashing your teeth at them. Most of them are already out of sight; but that big wisp of about forty birds doesn't seem bound on a very long journey. It is worth our while to keep our eyes on them for a bit. See! one has dropped like a bullet, and another, now two more. With any luck we shall meet them again, for they have taken shelter in the nearly dry bed of what was once a considerable stream. Let us be off then at once, and leave this delusive bog.

I shall have to refer to it again, for it is worth while knowing the proper way to treat such a splendid preserve, which in some weathers seems to act as a magnet to every bird in the neighbourhood.

Following the stream, which turns towards the hills again as it flows through the old river-bed, we begin to flush in twos and threes a good many of the birds that we marked down from the wisp. It is rather curious sort of ground here. Down the middle of the depression runs a low bank made of peats, close under which flows the stream. It is difficult to see the use of a bank in such a place; most probably it is an ancient boundary between two adjacent properties. Now, however, it is very convenient for another purpose, for from the top of it a gun can command the whole width of the two very different sorts of ground that lie on either side of it—on the stream side grass and rushes, on the other a strip of those knobby tussocks that we have met before. We pick our way easily

along the broad bank top, springing snipe on either side of us with delightful impartiality, as a rule within easy range from the tussocks, but rising wild from the edge of the rivulet.

Before long the stream leads us to the foot of the hills, where we will leave it, noticing that henceforth its course is through a shallow glen, whose heathery slopes merge gradually into a broadish level of rushes as they gently descend to the waters below. A pretty bit of scenery this, and a fine place for snipe in a frost, as the springs on the hillside afford many a warm moist spot when all the world is bound in an iron coldness. However, we will not penetrate the little valley to-day, turning instead back along the foot of the hill towards home. Time is getting on, and we have still two miles to walk before we reach the lane again.

The country ahead of us is very different to the marshes we have left. The hillsides are here divided up by high banks into various fields, some cultivated, in others only

a wild growth of long rank grass. Having climbed the first bank, steep enough to make even an Irish hunter think twice about it, we find ourselves in a field of turnips, whose tops are not yet brown and withered by the bite of frost. A covey of partridges are the only denizens, of sufficient strength to show that no guns have been at work splitting them up this year at any rate. Snipe are here, too, sometimes, especially when a mild hour of a frosty day causes the moisture to drip from the leaves on to the hard ground, enabling the slender bill of the bird to bore for worms in the welcome moisture.

The same remarks apply to the next enclosure, a rape-field, though even to-day it holds quite a number of snipe, including a Jack or two. This field is much wetter than the last, every furrow being half full of water, the broad depression that divides it forming quite a respectable little pond. It was from the edges of this that most of the birds rose, as you saw, very wild indeed.

Over the bank is a field of a very different nature, which looks as if it had not been used for civilised agriculture for many a long year. Choked up with high yellow grass, it looks as if it might contain infinite potentialities in the way of game. And so it proves. Plenty of snipe spring up as we plunge through the tall herbage. The birds lie close, and are forced by the height of the grass to fly at a level very convenient for aiming. Half-a-dozen partridges rise singly in the most confidential manner, varied by the occasional flapping form of a heath-owl; and finally we almost step upon a fine hare, whose fleeing form we can trace by the rapid parting of the grass-tops.

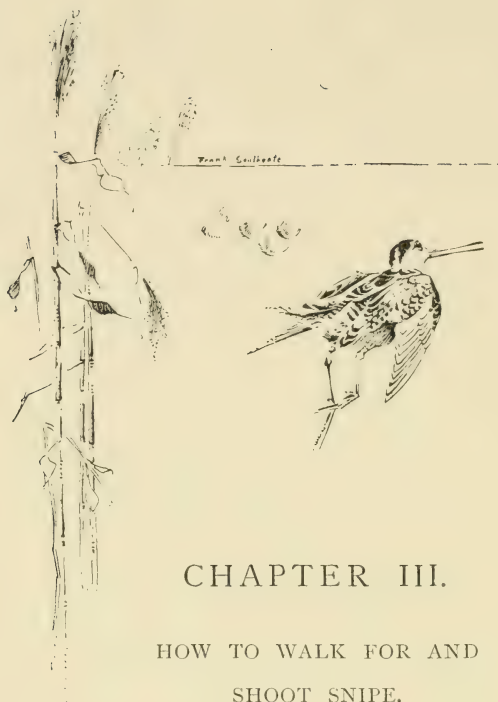
From the top of the high bank we get a surprise. The hillside is here composed of grass as green and firm as a tennis-lawn, over which are dotted many patches of rushes, each a few square yards in extent, though there is no water here to account for their presence. Neither are there any snipe, though the spot would be worth visiting if the wind were

blowing a gale from the other side of the hills. It would then be a famous shelter from the wind, though it contains food for nothing but a sheep. And so we go on, until meeting with another brook we decide to follow it down to the place where it nears the entrance to our "point," the lane by which we first entered the moor. This rivulet has lately asserted its independence by overflowing its banks, and flooding some acres of the level ground below, though two or three little islands of scanty grass stick up forlornly, as if they half regretted having refused to yield to the encroaching waters. A small wisp of snipe rises from every one of these spots, very wild, and apparently determined to fly for ever. They are the last we shall see to-day, for a climb over yet another bank, the thirtieth at least during the last two hours, brings us on to the stretch of low heather interspered with gorse over which we walked this morning after issuing from the lane.

The wintry sun is rolling down, a great striped ball, in the west, as if to assure us that

he is still in the heavens. He hasn't had much of a chance all day, but in the beauty of his departure he takes a glorious red revenge on the very clouds which have shut him in, and his prison-bars flash like jewelled gold. We return home in the many-coloured glow, tired and silent, but happy, for to-morrow we are to sally forth armed with something better than precepts; and has not the great dim moor, which is sinking to its misty sleep behind, promised us nothing less than twenty couple apiece as a reward for our trouble to-day?





CHAPTER III.

HOW TO WALK FOR AND SHOOT SNIPE.

THERE is no doubt that the best force in which to sally forth for a real business-like day's snipe-shooting is a select little party of one. That is to say, one shooter, as of course much time and labour will be saved if an intelligent and *taciturn* man be taken to carry the spoil and the lunch, lead dogs, &c.

A henchman is in fact indispensable, if only for the purpose of marking down birds which spring when your eyes and attention are directed elsewhere; and if of the right sort, he will not only greatly improve your sport, but will supply quite enough conversation during the walks from one bog to the other—the only times when such a luxury as an interchange of views should be permitted.

Some of the pleasantest men I have ever met have been my servants, or rather my companions, on snipe-shooting expeditions. Keepers of the regulation brand do not, as a rule, shine in this capacity. To begin with, they are usually not more than faintly interested in the sport itself. It is wet and laborious, and has for its object an insignificant little bird in whose abundance or otherwise they, the keepers, cannot feel the slightest proprietary interest. Of course there are exceptions, but as a general thing a professional keeper is neither so genial a companion nor so keen to make the most of chances as the stray ne'er-do-wells who hang

about most of the remote villages of Ireland and Wales—odd-job men, now working as masons, now as cow-men, now as handy-man to the priest, but ready to resign the most lucrative employment when the “gentleman” appears with his gun-cases and his brace of dogs.

These men, though perhaps bad citizens, are often perfect treasures on the snipe-moors. Sharp of eye, light of foot, and with an eye for country that many a general might envy, they often possess in addition a sweetness of temper and a genuine stock of that much misunderstood quality “gentility” that will very often make you feel the hand-shake almost more appropriate than the “tip” on parting. Here again there are exceptions, and you must occasionally expect to find lightness of foot and the other good qualities slightly tempered by lightness of finger in connection with your cartridge-bag.

One hint only, and I have done with our friend the lunch and game carrier. When things go wrong, when either the game, or

your shooting, or your dog is wild, producing a like effect on your temper, do not in your finest frenzy forget that in the first place it is probably not his fault, and in the second, that the day's sport was begun entirely by your will and for your amusement. If for any reason it ceases to amuse you, go home, and do not blackguard the man who gets no fun at all out of the toil save that afforded him by his instinctive love of sport. I have shot with men who persisted in walking, shooting, missing, and cursing the silent unfortunate behind them, long after the day had become absolutely hateful to themselves. This is foolish, and in the last item cowardly, unless, as will often be the case in wild districts, you are attended by a hot-blooded Celt, whom vituperation will goad into giving rather more than he receives!

Returning to the numbers of the snipe-shooting party, very few people will probably care to walk all day in solitary glory. One companion at least is necessary for any one but the keenest of the keen, though I must

confess that when birds have been plentiful I have often during the reflective interval of lunch been somewhat ashamed when I considered how little I had missed the society of my kind. Next to one, then, two is the best; more than this is inadmissible if real work is to be done, and even two will not, other things being equal, get as much sport per man as a solitary individual. If dogs are being used, there is the constant doubt as to who should take the point, and on these occasions even *sotto voce* courtesy is undesirable, for the snipe may not wait for the quickest of decisions on points of precedence.

The whole question of dogs will be discussed later, but it may be said here that to be the less hardy and active walker of a pair of guns shooting snipe over dogs is an experience to be avoided if possible. The reason of this will be apparent when the method of approaching the "point" is explained. If, in addition to your limited bodily powers, your natural instinct, your observation of the wind, and the thousand and one

things that go to make a successful sportsman are inferior to the same qualities in your companion, your disadvantage will be more apparent and more irritating when plodding after "Rock" or "Trust" than in any other circumstance of shooting. No; if you prefer to find your birds with the aid of your dogs, and there is no more thoroughly delightful form of the sport, let them be your only companions, and you will gain not only in bag but in peace of mind. Finally, birds will constantly be flushed midway between two guns walking in line and wide apart; and here, too, there is a great danger of the doubt, which to the cowering snipe means distance and salvation.

Of course it would be absurd to urge these advantages of solitude for every description of country. If your beat is wide, open marsh or moorland, two guns will get *nearly* as much shooting as one, and if naturally disinclined for lonely wandering, will gain far more in enjoyment than they lose in slain. I have shot snipe in company

with parties of all sizes. I have even, *horresco referens*, advanced to the attack as one of a long line of gunners, who insisted on treating the moors in the same stately battle-order fashion as they did their native Norfolk turnip-drills. Every snipe in the country was duly found and flushed, I must admit, but at a distance which drew from that floundering skirmishing-line many a growl. "Much better fun drivin' 'em," ejaculated one disgusted sportsman, a noted performer with three ejectors in a grouse-butt; and I agreed that the amusement very probably would be about equal, if not superior. This, however, is an extreme case, and it is only necessary to summarise by repeating the advice to limit your numbers as far as possible, and, if congenial, to seek your sport with the irreducible minimum of one. You will come across so many odd corners that hold one bird, and so many little strips of rush and reed too narrow for the progress of more than one human, that you will bless your unsociability a

dozen times in the course of each day's shooting.

Snipe-ground is so variously constituted that it is impossible to give instructions that will apply in every case as to how it should be negotiated. But it may be broadly stated that whenever possible it is pleasanter, less laborious, and far more profitable to shoot with the wind at your back than to walk against or across it. And this for many reasons. In the first place, snipe, in common with every bird that flies, invariably and of necessity spring from the ground head to wind, "hanging" against it for varying periods, according as it is strong or gentle, before they have obtained sufficient mastery over it to enable them to get themselves under way and their flight under control. Consequently, if you approach them *down* the wind, they not only rise towards you, but for an instant, often only the fraction of a second,—the time, in fact, occupied in converting their upward spring from the ground into actual flight,—they are nearly or

quite motionless as far as lateral or forward movement is concerned.

It seems almost impertinent to describe the infinitesimal check that a springing snipe must sustain before he can dart away by the word motionless. Nevertheless it is a physical or ballistic fact, and one to which five out of six of the snipe in your bag will owe their doom. Many men are absolutely unable to perceive this check at all. It is, in fact, *almost* imperceptible, except on rough windy days, when it will often be exaggerated into an obvious "hover," unless, as occasionally happens with close-lying snipe in a gale of wind, the bird is blown and tumbled bodily down-wind, with never an attempt at a struggle against it. This is the first and greatest advantage of walking down-wind.

Secondly, the breast of a snipe being snowy white, whilst its back is in almost perfect harmony with the dark yellows and reds of the ground from which it usually springs, it is an immense gain if you can force the bird to rise with its breast towards yourself. A

snipe tearing up-wind close to the ground is an exasperatingly invisible object even on a clear day; and if the light is bad you may often "see nothing of him but his squeak," as a henchman of the distressful isle once ejaculated. And here we have another advantage—*i.e.*, that a bird springing towards you as you walk down-wind is obliged to rise to at least the height of your shoulder, which is the most convenient elevation of any for aiming, whereas on the opposite plan he can, and usually does, skim away an inch or so off the ground, an exemplification of the poetry of motion and "protective coloration" that only a philosopher could admire at the time.

Again it must be urged, in favour of what sailors call "scudding," that the shooter will be spared the annoyance of finding a second barrel or a right-and-left interfered with by that curse of the game-gun, "blow-back." I have shot with nearly every powder, both black and nitro, and have never found any of them *entirely* free from this nuisance. It is true that in most of the better brands of

nitros, what used to be a positive danger has been reduced to a very occasional discomfort; but having once experienced the smart of a particle of unconsumed powder in his eye, the sportsman may find that his shooting for the rest of the day will be as injuriously affected by the mere dread of its recurrence as it would be if he were certain that every shot were going to give him a dusting. No man can shoot well unless he can entirely detach his mind from every consideration but the bird rising before him, and the involuntary flinching that follows one or two "blow-backs" may put you off your form for an indefinite period. At any rate, however little you may be afflicted with this description of nerves, it is a real handicap which you will do well to avoid by walking downwind when and where possible.

Apart from these considerations, it is undoubtedly a great saving of physical labour if you can run before the wind instead of beating against it, and in snipe-shooting every ounce of strength uselessly expended

is likely to be so much loss to the bag, to say nothing of the enjoyment. Finally, it is in any case harder to keep the eyes wide open and clear if a cold or strong wind is blowing straight into them, than if they are comfortably sheltered on "the lee side of your face." The human optic must be in particularly good working order to gauge correctly the flight of an erratic little object travelling at goodness knows how many miles an hour along a road which certainly cannot be "called straight."

Down-wind shooting is certainly the luxury of snipe-shooting, although occasionally—very occasionally—there will be a sameness in the description of shots that will not commend itself in a sport of which variety is the very life and soul. Snipe would not be worth shooting if they were easy to shoot, and it must be confessed that a long walk may be taken down-wind over *open* country without the sportsman's especially "snipey" qualities being very severely tested.

In enclosed land it is a very different

matter, for a bank is a bank to a snipe, no matter from what air blows the breeze,—an obstruction to be hurtled over faster than ever tennis-ball skimmed the net from the racket of Renshaw. There is a delightful experience, too, which is peculiarly the property of the down-wind shooter, and that is when a couple of birds spring simultaneously in front of him, and make off in exactly opposite directions. It is on these occasions that a “right-and-left” is something more than a figure of speech, and a complacent smirk may be forgiven the artist who accomplishes it, as he watches his dog trot off to pick up birds that lie stone-dead, “at the extremities of the diameter of a circle of which you are the centre,” as a mathematical gunner (peace to his soul! he died on Spion Kop) once expressed it.

So much for the defence. Against this method the only thing to be urged is the fact that the snipe are far more likely to hear the sound of your approach as you advance upon them down-wind than if you

were beating up towards them from the contrary direction. This, though theoretically true, will be found to be of very little importance practically. Very fierce must be the gale that prevents the snipe in any case from hearing your footsteps squelching over the quaggy ground or through the crisp stiff rushes. The ring of your shots, too, can never be so smothered by the roaring wind as not to strike as a warning to the listening ears of every little bundle of nerves lurking close, perhaps all the closer for its fear, under the shelter of tuft and tussock.

I firmly believe that all wild fowl, even when resting, are aware of the presence of a human being, wind or no wind, within a distance of a quarter of a mile in open country, sometimes more, never less, and that only the hope that the hated being will not chance to come their way induces them to remain *perdu*. The success of the old device of walking with ever-lessening circles, carefully looking the other way all

the time, around birds marked down in the open, is partial evidence of this. Even duck can be circumvented in this manner occasionally, though they usually take alarm before the circle has diminished to gun-range. It is absurd to suppose that the keen-sighted birds, whose very sleep is of the one-eye-open order, cannot perceive you, to say nothing of the warning that the shooting-boot of even the most fairy-footed individual must give.

However, though there can be no two opinions as to the advantages of down-wind shooting, it will be very seldom that it can be managed for any length of time during a day's sport without much counter-marching and waste of time. Snipe-ground usually abounds in odd patches of marsh and bog projecting at all angles from the main shooting; attempts to start invariably from the windward side of each of these would mean an immense number of fatiguing detours.

So that the young shooter is advised not to think overmuch about getting the wind

“dead aft,” but to take things as they come. Even if he should miss a great proportion of the birds bolting up-wind, the few he will kill by the quickest of snap-shots will not be the least proudly remembered when he comes to fight his battles over again to himself in the interval between tumbling into bed and the advent of slumber,—a delightful period of after-joy, the especial property of sportsmen. This is the time when the fences are topped again one by one, the bump-bump of the grouse on the heather is heard again, or the boil of the salmon and the bend of the rod-top to his mighty wrench beheld as vividly as when they thrilled you in the morning hours.

There is, however, one situation in which it is occasionally advisable to make a deliberate choice of shooting against the wind even if it be troublesome to do so, and that is when you are about to commence your day's sport near the leeward march or boundary of your shooting rights. Any attempt to get the wind “aft,” or even on “the beam,” may

possibly result in many of the birds missed or flushed out of shot departing out of bounds for the rest of the day; for though they will of course spring head to wind, they are far more likely to make their final escape over the frontier towards which you are driving them, than to pass you by to take up a fresh position in rear. Whereas if you travel quickly along the boundary, making here and there short incursions up-wind, nearly every bird that departs unscathed will drop eventually somewhere on your own domain, to be dealt with more carefully at your next merry meeting.

A very favourite haunt of snipe, often their only one in a frost, is the rush-fringed margin of a brook, especially if it be of a winding nature with little reedy peninsulas projecting from the salients of each bend, and here and there a stretch of growth or mud in mid-channel. Excellent shooting may be had under such conditions, for the snipe usually lie well, occasionally even requiring to be flushed by a dog, if collected

on one of these islands separated from the bank by a channel of fair width. But here, if the breeze blows up or down stream, the gun must certainly walk down-wind, otherwise the snipe will be almost impossible to hit as they dash away straight between the banks of the stream, dodging round bends and any bushes that may be on the margin. It is absolutely necessary to force them away from the brook to one side or the other, and a down-wind advance is the only way to do it. Of course if the wind blows across the stream, you will do best to stick to the windward bank, not only because of the easier shots obtainable, but because the majority of birds will usually be lying under its shelter.

In connection with shooting along brooks, it is commonly supposed that it is better to work the banks by retiring from and advancing towards them alternately, than to progress steadily along the margin, presumably with the idea that the snipe will not so readily perceive the approach of the invader. As far as my experience goes, such

a method is not only a waste of time and trouble, but has also the disadvantage of causing you to miss over many birds lying between the point at which you left the stream and that at which you again strike it. It must be remembered that in snipe-shooting half the battle is flushing the birds, whether you actually get a shot or not, for it will be seldom that a large percentage may not be marked down for a second attempt. Of course if a certain spot on the water's edge is known to harbour birds, it will pay you to approach it cautiously, possibly necessitating a retreat from the bank some distance before aiming at the place; but such a manœuvre would only be necessary in a brook of quite unusual straightness.

I have noticed that snipe flushed from the sides of watercourses do not generally take long flights, whatever the weather or wind may be, their places of refuge on such occasions being occasionally very unexpected and odd, so that careful marking is particularly advisable. I have many times observed

snipe under these conditions drop into the centre of ploughed fields and under stone walls quite innocent of cover.

Whilst on this subject, it may be as well to impress upon the reader the importance of mastering as soon as possible the topography of his shooting-ground. Snipe are occasionally astonishingly regular in their flight when flushed by dog or man from certain haunts, and will time after time make for odd covers which the sportsman has not considered it worth while to visit. When shooting on strange ground, the complete disappearance for the rest of the day of large wisps which have risen wild is a constant source of wonder to many people. When such is the case, search out thoroughly every little insignificant corner, wet or dry, that lies in the direction of their flight. If you are so fortunate as to find one or two of these occupied, you should have some pretty shooting, for a wisp is very seldom a wisp more than once in a day, and it is ten to one that the snipe will lie well.

I call to mind a large flooded marsh, from one corner of which a flock of about fifty birds made off in a certain direction daily immediately their territory was invaded. There was only one place to which they *could* have gone,—so said my man, who knew every inch of the country; but, snipe-like, they were never there. One day it occurred to me, after the usual performance had taken place, to explore a densely grown little combe or hollow that lay to one side of my customary walk. The place was certainly not more than thirty yards across at the top, and sloped down like an inverted cone to a point below, where trickled a tiny bramble-grown stream,—a possible lie for a woodcock, but as likely to hold a tiger as a snipe. However, snipe were there, not one or two, but fifty at least, and in a delightful state of unsociability, undoubtedly the company which had screamed adieu from the marsh behind. I got nine couple there on that day, killed, but was unable to retrieve at least half that number again, and moved

the rest on to the "only place they *could* have gone to," where the more favourable ground enabled a fairly satisfactory toll to be taken. Had it not been for the dreadful nature of the undergrowth, and the extreme difficulty of shooting when up to the armpits in brambles, that little "woolly" dell might have been the scene of most commendable bags. Subsequently snipe were always there *after* the marsh had been shot over, never, as I proved, before. But it had taken me three years to find it out.

If shooting down the wind cannot be managed, naturally the next best thing is to walk across it, and it will be found that this will be possible on by far the greater portion of your daily round. But here, too, there are *pros* and *cons* to be considered. Will it be better to proceed with the wind blowing across your path from left to right or from right to left? In the first case you will have to shoot at the snipe flying to your left, in the latter to your right. To me personally the former direction is the easier, but

I believe that most people declare in favour of the latter. This is a matter that the reader must decide for himself when the choice arises.

Whichever plan he elects to follow, he will, if birds are numerous, have some of the most delightful shooting that these islands afford. Perhaps the acme of the sport is attained when the wind is blowing warm but freshly *across* your path as you traverse a wide open stretch of moor or bog. There is now no necessity to return on your tracks in order to take the next strip before the wind (a paying method when the breeze is very strong); the ground can be fairly walked out from end to end and back again in a series of long U's, the shots presenting a fascinating sequence of lessons in quickness and "holding ahead," as the snipe slip off on either hand, close to the ground, at every conceivable angle, and at inconceivable speed.

A hint as to "marking" may be given here. When shooting without a retriever in long grass or rushes, it will be found

that every now and then a bird, clearly seen to fall dead, will have disappeared in a most mysterious and exasperating fashion when you or your attendant go forward to gather it. The number of snipe completely lost in this manner throughout a season's shooting is astonishing ; but it will be reduced if it is remembered that a dead snipe usually falls *nearer* to you than it appears to do. I have often seen sportsmen walk right over their bird, fallen, maybe, back upwards, and harmonising exactly with the surrounding growth, only to search vainly and impatiently perhaps ten yards beyond it. This peculiarity is especially noticeable when birds are shot, as they constantly will be, as they skim over a wall or bank. From your side it will look as if the impetus of their flight had carried them many yards into the field or marsh on the other side ; but in nine cases out of ten the bird will be found right under the bank itself, often in the ditch or rough herbage that runs along its foot.

I think it is pretty certain that a snipe not killed outright, yet *in extremis*, always looks out for a secure hiding-place in which to drop, even though it may die before reaching the ground, a fact that may account for the wonderful concealment of many dead birds. I can only say that I have witnessed birds falling with a bump, perfectly dead, into the only patch of cover available for a long distance, too often for the circumstance to be merely the result of chance. In the case of a mortally wounded bird topping a bank on the other side of which lies a bare field, it is extremely probable that, after a hasty glance and a short flight over the unfriendly ground, the dying creature, seeing no cover ahead within reach of its failing strength, turns back and gains the ditch or growth below the sportsman's line of sight. I cannot say that I have ever actually observed this in the case of a snipe afterwards picked up dead, but with slightly wounded birds the manœuvre is so common that it is evidently an instinct, and one not noticeable in any other

game-bird with which I am acquainted. Whatever the reason may be, the fact is nine times out of ten as stated, so that whenever you are badly beaten by a snipe which you are morally certain is a dead bird, whether it fell in open bog, rushes, or over a bank, your best move, after a reasonable search about the place where you *expected* to find it, is *revocare pedem* to any little hollow or patch of cover that lies between the spot you are searching and that from which you fired.



CHAPTER IV.

BOGTROTTERING, ETC.

THIS is indeed almost a hopeless art to attempt to teach anyhow but practically. The accomplished bogtrotter is, like other artists, usually born, not made. Some men will at their very first essay trip over rotten, shaking marsh as safely as if it were a pavement, whereas to others a bog will never appear anything but a floundering perspiratory terror. The whole gist of the thing is of course the necessity of progressing at a fair speed without looking at the feet at all, or seeking (except unconsciously) a firm landing-place for the next step. Theoretically it may seem impossible to traverse a bog of which every inch is rotten, and at the same time keep the eyes alert for springing snipe and the

body ready for action, without coming to grief; but that it is not so a walk with many an Irish sportsman will testify. Some of these latter are verily as much at home on the morasses as on the hard highroad. I have seen them striding, nay, running, over ground that quivered for twenty yards on either side at each step, without even going over ankles, though they are absolutely unable to tell you how it was done. Though far from being a performer of this class, I can usually go where any other Sassenach can go, and occasionally manage places which are too much for the average snipe-shooter; and as something will be expected from me on this head, I must endeavour to put the aspiring bogtrotter on the right track, even if I cannot promise to preserve him always from an up-to-the-middle subsidence into mother earth.

To begin with, I believe that half the art consists in keeping the knees bent, and in never lifting the foot far from the ground. A slouching, crouching, daisy-cutting style of gait is the thing, the hinder foot being more

dragged than lifted forward, and never moved at all until the foremost one has felt support beneath it. This "feeling" is the most indescribable portion of the whole procedure.

For the purpose of this description I have made several experiments in analysing the physical sensations which accompany a successful walk over bad ground. I find that the advancing foot is invariably strongly contracted when about to touch earth, the toes being drawn tightly downwards, in a most uncomfortable posture if one had time to think about it. On placing it flat and free upon the ground, a feat of no small difficulty, so strong was the instinct of contraction, I found that a false step or a deepish sinking was the invariable result. Sometimes, of course, the ground is too rotten to bear even the most momentary contact of the foot, and then the bent knee makes recovery possible before it is too late, and this without any perceptible effort unless the stride has been over long.

Bogs are usually of three types : the muddy holding kind, from which an effort to withdraw

the foot very often nearly, and occasionally really, pulls off a tightly-laced boot. If good at the game, these cannot be traversed too quickly and glidingly, or on the contrary too slowly and carefully if the shooter is one of the steadfast order. They will nearly always bear even a heavy man if he sets about them the right way, and, it may be added, do not often contain very many snipe. Then there are the long tussock-studded strips, previously described, that so often fringe the sides of brooks, each tussock capable of sustaining a ton weight, but the intervals between them unutterably rotten and occasionally very deep. Nature seems to have designed this species of snipe-ground as a sort of practical joke, for it will constantly be found that the tufts have been placed at exactly the distance of an over-long stride from one to the other,—a most exasperating interval for a man on tenter-hooks of expectation as regards his quarry. Such are in fact the most difficult of any to negotiate, but perhaps the only ones which practice will make noticeably easier to traverse

safely. Even the most experienced may expect many a tumble from over- or understepping the mark, and it may be well to remark here, that the best method to carry a gun over ground of this sort is in the left hand balanced in the middle at the "trail," so that if a fall occurs it may be instantly dropped, with little chance of injury to itself or anything else. It is surprising how quickly after a little practice a gun can be thrown up to the shoulder from this position.

Finally, we have those terrible, unmitigatedly rotten marshes, such as the red bogs of Ireland, that refuse to bear even a tiny terrier on their treacherous surface. They are most commonly situated about the sources of streams, though here and there they will be found of smaller extent at a good distance from any water except the hidden springs which no doubt form them. The young shooter is advised not to tackle these dangerous traps unless either he or his attendant is well acquainted with their geography. There are usually one or two well-

known tracks that cross them, which it would be hopeless for a stranger to attempt to discover. Occasionally, however, and this is the case in some of the very worst and shakiest of the kind, the surface is underlaid by solid ground at a depth of from 1 to 3 feet. I know of several such, and if one is content with slow progress, nothing could be safer (and more filthy, it must be added) than to wade through them.

On the rare occasions in which snipe lie well in these quivering bogs, great sport may be had if the subsoil is of this firm nature. You cannot be too deliberate: each step should occupy at least half a minute, and if properly managed your advance will be almost devoid of noise or earth-quaking propensities. Here and there will be found an apparently bottomless hole; but the vivid green of the growth around it should give ample warning of its presence, and in any case recovery from a false step is easy if the hinder foot is well embedded in the ooze. If by evil chance you should one day happen to sink

too deep for extrication, unload or fire off your gun at once, and plant it flat on the mud in front of you, holding it by the extremities of the barrels and stock. Thus supported you could keep your head above ground all day if necessary, though I sincerely hope that the necessity will never arise. Do *not* struggle when you find yourself beyond your own aid; it will only sink you deeper, and exhaust your strength.

Many a gloomy tale have some of the Irish "gossoons" about dreadful disappearances of this kind, but as a matter of fact it is one of the rarest accidents in the world, and certainly does not happen to a man more than once in fifty years, though cattle are constantly engulfed, owing to their shape not lending itself to recovery. One of the oddest occurrences that ever came to my knowledge in this connection was the loss of a valuable horse in a tiny patch of bottomless bog, actually of less superficial area than the animal itself. The body of the poor brute was never recovered, but it was ascer-

tained that its hind legs sank first, gradually pulling the body upon end, in which position the bog was just sufficiently large to contain the carcass. The surface was strong enough to bear a heavy man easily, as the disconsolate owner demonstrated to me against my advice.

On seeking counsel from old hands, the young sportsman is more often than not disheartened at the very outset by being told that snipe-shooting is a "knack." Moreover, if his Mentor is one of that numerous class who "never bother about snipe," it is ten to one that he is further given to understand that this mysterious art is quite unattainable unless a man is naturally blessed with it from infancy. Of which statements the first part is perhaps pretty true, and the second both untrue and absurd. Snipe-shooting *is* a "knack," in so far as it is impossible to attain perfection in all its branches all at once, and perhaps from the fact that proficiency may one day arrive like a flash; but as this desirable consummation

will only take place after periods of practice and failure, varying in length with the varying capabilities of individuals, it is difficult to see how this particular "knack" differs from that belonging to any other worldly business or sport.

Given good eyesight, quick decision, and some previous acquaintance with the use of the gun on slower-flying game, any one will in time shoot snipe at least fairly well, though of course the first-class performers will be as few and far between as they are at billiards, or cricket, or ploughing. We cannot all be cracks, thank goodness! or the pleasure of pursuing either game or games would disappear at an alarming rate. Imagine what the world would be like if every man with a gun killed five out of six of the birds he aimed at, or every cricketer went to the wicket with a certain hundred runs ready for the despondent fieldsmen!

The only real "knack," so far as I can see, in snipe-shooting is that of being always

prepared to fling gun to shoulder, no matter in what constrained or awkward position the shooter, by reason of the inequalities or marshiness of the ground, may be at the moment of a bird's springing. The power of doing this naturally, or of learning to do it, is certainly so much more the property of some men than of others, that it may perhaps be dignified by the title of "knack." Quick sight—by which I mean the power to use good eyes quickly, a by no means universal accomplishment—and determination are not knack, and to call them so is a misuse of terms. They are both capable of improvement, I had almost said of creation, by cultivation—so, therefore, any able-bodied man who has or acquires them by that "universal provider," practice, has nine-tenths of the law on his side already in the matter of shooting snipe.

Taking for granted, then, that a sportsman has trained his eye to see the snipe as they spring, and his hand to the feel of a gun, wherein lies the remainder of the

secret of success? It is, I believe, in this, that he must trust his sight sufficiently to bring his gun to his shoulder and pull trigger *at the very instant* that his brain has received the telegraphic message from his eyes. No matter how close the snipe spring up before you (it will seldom be your happy fate to have to kick them up in the British Islands), bang! should go your first barrel at once.¹ You will often miss, distressingly often at first; but misses notwithstanding, you will soon be taking a much more satisfactory toll than if you had yielded to that fatal first instinct, the original sin of all shooting mankind, of pottering and waiting for a better chance.

In snipe-shooting your best chance is in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred your first, which in shooting up-wind or in enclosed land will usually be your last also. The trick must be done "by eye" and instinct, like playing forward to fast bowling at cricket. There is less time for prepara-

¹ Of course I am here speaking only of Full-Snipe.

tion and getting what is called a "good sight of the bird," than in any sport with the gun in Great Britain. You will find that dropping the tallest and most express-train pheasants that ever came over you in stately procession, though truly the work is quick enough at times, is a leisurely proceeding compared to the instantaneous accuracy required in dealing with a tiny sad-coloured bird spinning full-speed ahead, all steam up at once, as often as not at the limit of gun-range. Excepting perhaps a driven partridge whizzing towards you over a low hedge, a snipe zigzagging up-wind, whether near or far, is the most difficult bird in the world to hit if you make the slightest attempt to dwell upon his flight either with the eye or the muzzle of the gun. Whereas, given the qualities previously mentioned, your first sight of him, and therefore your first barrel, should be pretty accurate, and if not may be immediately corrected by your second.

If you have ever been fortunate enough to walk or shoot snipe in company with a

really fine performer, you must have noticed how quickly, when forced to a double salute, his second barrel followed his first. Indeed I know several very consistent scorers who confess to their first barrel being always more or less experimental, their chief reliance being placed on the corrected alignment of the second. This is, of course, a bad style of shooting, which I do not recommend to beginners. Faith in the second barrel has, however, often the merit of rendering the first successful by doing away to a certain extent with over-anxiety at the moment of the shooter's becoming aware of a bird springing before him. The gunner being so nonchalant over his first discharge, is exceedingly likely to down his bird, a discovery that no doubt originated the habit in the sportsmen I refer to.

To repeat, then : it is on your first chance and your first barrel that you should really rely, and the quicker you are in seizing the chance and firing the barrel, the bigger will be your annual bag of snipe—a fact that has been, I think, so conclusively proved that it would

not require much insistence, were it not that the usual advice of writers and talkers about snipe-shooting is the adoption of an exactly opposite course. I can only say that in my own case, at least, the "waiting game" has time after time resulted in the conversion of easy shots into difficult ones, with the inevitable accompaniment of that distressing and only drawback to sport with the gun, wounded birds.

I hope that every reader can truthfully say that he would far rather clean miss a whole series of birds than gather them all still alive. It is, I know, a platitude of shooting; but if it were only generally felt to be something more than this, we would not perhaps see so much of that cruel, because in the case of snipe so often successful, "long chance taking," to witness which often makes the heart of the real sportsman a good deal heavier than the bag of the savage who indulges in it. Any duffer may hit a snipe at 70 yards with one or two at least of the 500 or so pellets that usually compose a

snipe charge. At that distance, even with the best gun, the *width* of the charge of shot will be something over 200 feet, and though the outside grains will have but little relative momentum, it may be sufficient to injure so frail a target as a four-ounce bird. A single pellet may, and often does, break a bone or a leg, or, as I have constantly seen, the bill of the poor bird, which may or may not fall and meet a merciful death at the rough hands of its torturer; but it is playing a terribly low game on a sporting little wanderer, who certainly plays his part of it well enough according to the laws. Eschew long shots, then, as you would cheating at cards or any other atrocity, and kill or miss your snipe neatly and smartly within sporting range. You will not often wound if you are as quick over your work as you ought to be.

There is, of course, a great deal of unconscious art to be brought into play before the instantaneous first barrel I recommend. This is no place to enter into a disquisi-

tion on the physiology of shooting, but it will be easily imagined how many and how incredibly swift are the processes which a man has to perform before he can kill a series of birds darting away like lightning, each one probably at a different angle, a different pace, and a different height to the last. But as I have presumed in the reader a general acquaintance with the art of shooting, it is only necessary to say that in the case of snipe-shooting these processes are exactly the same as in any other sport with the gun, only quicker, more varied, and more unconscious. For this reason it is doubly difficult to reduce to writing the method of holding the gun at a snipe on the wing. Except, of course, in the rare case of a snipe flying in a direct line away from you, the gun is never *held* on the bird at all. As far as one can describe the indescribable, the correct movement seems to be an uninterrupted lift and swing, the lift of course being to or, more commonly, towards the shoulder, and the swing in the same direction as, but

faster than, the flight of the bird. There must be nothing of the "two motions" business beloved of drill-sergeants, or the shooter will get into the bad habit of pottering. A gun brought with a rap, or "smartly," as the sergeant says, into the hollow of the shoulder needs a certain amount of steadying, a concession that is unconsciously granted by the "one! two!" class of marksmen, entailing naturally loss of time to the gunner and gain in distance to the bird. I have often heard it questioned whether good shooting could possibly be made unless the butt of the gun were firmly bedded into the shoulder at each discharge. As far as my observation goes, I can safely say that good shooting, at snipe anyhow, cannot possibly result if this necessarily slow action of the stock is attended to every time. Touch the shoulder it does, as a rule, of course; but the touch is often so slight until after the shot has left the barrel as to be practically nonexistent. Any one who has seen a crack rabbit-shot crumple up the furry little thunder-

bolts as they flash from burrow to burrow or across a narrow ride will understand what I mean. Here again the gun is seldom brought into the shoulder, often, indeed, scarcely higher than the breast, and, in the case of one or two "fliers," astonishing practice has been made from the hip!

As regards elevation, the best advice on this, as on most other points, is that given by the writer of the chapter on snipe-shooting in the Badminton Library, "*always aim above a snipe*," though the reason given for it is obviously not invariably accurate—*i.e.*, that "the bird is pretty sure to be rising at the time." As a matter of fact, quite a common shot is that when a snipe is dipping in short sharp jerks into the wind's eye, so that if you were to look steadily along the midrib of the gun you would as often lose sight of the bird below it as you would see it above—the former, it may be added, being the safest instant at which to pull trigger. However, whether a snipe is actually rising or not, it must nearly always be treated as if it were,

owing to the speed at which it moves beneath and across the trajectory of the shot. In other words, with the single exception of a bird crossing from left to right, when it will, of course, be in sight all the time, at the actual moment of firing the snipe should be invisible to the shooter, being hidden by the gun as it swings with, but faster than, the object.

It is a complicated question, this lateral impetus of the muzzle. There is no more stock subject of discussion amongst sportsmen, especially those afflicted with the itch of ink-spilling. I do not propose to enter very deeply into the argument, especially as, like this precious fiscal question which is convulsing us, it appears rather of the "circular" order, from the fact that each side of it has its successful exponents, and must therefore be correct! No one expects a number of first-class batsmen to play a certain kind of ball in exactly the same way. The probability is that every one of them would play it differently, though all, perhaps, would score the desired boundary hit from it. It is the

same with the various systems of shooting. One may be theoretically better than another, but for certain shooters practically not so good for some reason or another, possibly from early training or natural instinct.

I will not do more than name the three methods which constantly do interesting but inconclusive battle in the smoking-room, or the correspondence columns of the sporting press. Firstly, should the gun be thrown up at the estimated distance ahead of the bird, and fired there at once, or, in other words, "held ahead"; or, secondly, should it be first aligned dead on the bird, swung with its flight, and be fired as it swings—*i.e.*, "held on"; or, thirdly, should it be brought up as before on the object, but jerked forward in front of it and fired when it has reached the required distance? And another unanswerable question—in all these cases how much allowance should be made for the speed of the bird and that of the shot intended to intercept it?

As regards the three methods propounded,

the "lift and swing" method I have recommended above appears to resemble the second on the list more than any other, though it differs in one important particular—*i.e.*, that in my plan it is fatal to be in any way conscious of the primary alignment on the bird. And this for a very good reason. Consciousness that your gun is pointed at the object means catching sight of your game and your gun-barrels simultaneously, and a man who does this constantly will never make a snipe-shot. The unconscious effort, too, to preserve the alignment has the effect of checking the swing of the gun, and I have invariably found that when bird and barrels were both visible, a miss behind was the result. By my method, in shots from left to right I see the bird only; in shots from right to left, or at birds going straight away, I see nothing but the gun at the moment of firing, the bird being hidden by the barrels. There is, of course, nothing new in all this. The method has been practised ever since shooting at flying birds began. But to beginners this losing sight of the

much coveted game is the hardest part of the whole business—it seems so much like chance-work. With many shooters, both young and old, indeed, it appears to demand an actual physical effort to interpose the barrels between the bird and the eyes. But for this, as with most other things, the best cure is success. A few birds promptly downed will do more good than volumes of theoretical instruction.

Just a word of advice on a common situation of snipe-shooting, the proper treatment or the reverse of which may make the difference of a good many hundred birds, added or lost to your bag during your shooting career. We will suppose that you have fired at and killed a snipe, which has risen alone, with your first barrel, as you will, I hope, constantly do. Now, every work on shooting that I have read lays great stress on the importance of reloading at once, so that you may be ready for another bird in the shortest possible time. My advice is exactly the reverse. Do *not* reload at once, but on the other hand, after your first barrel, remain on the *qui vive* at

the "ready" for a minute or so, with your left barrel only charged. It is perfectly astonishing how many snipe select the precise moment when you are fumbling for a fresh cartridge to spring up and away before your open gun. The result is usually a violent closing of the breech, followed by a long despairing shot, and perhaps an equally ineffective and unclassical expletive. Speaking for myself, I can only say that I have, over and over again, "scored off" in this way a cunning second bird, which I verily believe had been listening for the click of the opening breech-action before it ventured to follow its departed comrade. Perhaps a truer explanation of this idiosyncrasy of snipe is the instinctive habit I have observed in nearly all wild birds, namely, that of crouching closer for an instant at the ringing report of a gun, and waiting until the echoes have died away before taking flight.

One of the chief charms of snipe-shooting is the delightful variety of the shots offered. In the course of a long day's sport it will be a rare thing to find two birds behaving in exactly the same manner, even under identical

conditions of wind and surroundings. It is no doubt the consequent impossibility of settling upon any fixed course of treatment that is responsible for the prevalence of that mysterious disease "gun fever" more amongst young snipe-shooters than any other class of sportsmen, even though other kinds of game may be scarcer, more valuable, and the possession of them just as earnestly desired. How well we know the symptoms! On certain "jumpy" sort of days even the oldest hands are unpleasantly reminded of the tremors of their sporting youth. During the writer's last attack he made a careful diagnosis of the malady for the purpose of devising a remedy, with the surprising result that a cure was instantly effected by the very effort to note the symptoms! As far as the latter can be reduced to writing, the physical indications appeared to be a clenching of the jaws, a certain uncomfortable rigidity of the muscles of the neck—in fact, a general feeling of tenseness all over the body, extending even to the arms, which seem to work on badly oiled hinges instead of with their

natural freedom. Add to this an exasperating difficulty in finding your accustomed comfortable grip of the left hand on the fore-end, an irresistible desire to fiddle with the safety-catch, and, finally, a tendency to fling gun to shoulder when even a lark flutters up ahead, the said motion being of the wooden order, and liable to bed the butt of the gun on all sorts of unexpected and unusual portions of the anatomy, and you have a collection of symptoms eminently undesirable in a man playing a game in which absolute elasticity is the chief essential.

There are two or three cures that have been suggested for this very real complaint, two of which I have already described—viz., a *dégagé* first barrel, which will often agreeably restore your equanimity by its unexpected success, and next dissection, as contemptuous as you can make it, of the ridiculous condition of your nerves. Much may be done by detaching the *Ego* from your Cosmos, and poking fun at it as mercilessly as if it were a foolish companion instead of your foolish self! An-

other excellent method demands a certain amount of self-denial, and that is to throw up the gun at two or three birds without firing, a proceeding which has the peculiar effect of giving you a possibly quite unjustified opinion of the deadliness of your aim, and thus doing away with the real cause of your previous failure, the fear of missing. Of course, a man who is out of health, or who has smoked too many cigars and drunk just one whisky-and-soda too many overnight, or who owes or is owed more than he can afford, or is in any way afflicted with any of the thousand and one drawbacks of civilisation, cannot expect to be in the very best condition for snap-shooting. Black Care perched on the end of your gun-barrels will cause them to be very wobbly and uncertain, and it is not every man who can make the little black demon skip off at the first crack of the Schultze. But I hope that the reader will never have to carry so unpleasant a burden on his tramps through the lonely marshland. Walk light, O reader, with a

light gun and a light heart. Drop your troubles into the first bottomless bog-hole you come across; they will sink the faster the heavier they be, and thus relieved, you will be ready to shoulder a hundred-weight of snipe!



CHAPTER V.

DOGS.

THERE is no point more discussed and differed about by snipe-shooters than the vexed question of dogs. Will a pointer or a setter find you more snipe than you would find without him? As is usually the case in these sort of arguments, it is a mistake to lay down a hard-and-fast rule. Snipe-shooting is the most inexact of sporting sciences, and this dog or no dog question is one that can be answered with less finality than any in connection with it. It depends upon so many things: the wind, whether a good or bad scenting one, and the angle at which it blows across your beat; the weather, and its effect on the ground; the constantly varying humour of the snipe; the general

nature of the country over which you intend to shoot ; and, finally, the temperament and capabilities of your dogs themselves.

A brief consideration of each of these chances may be of use in guiding the young sportsman as to whether or not he should steel his heart into turning his back on those pleading eyes in the stable-yard. If he is worth his salt, he will find it very hard not to release his brother sportsmen from their chains ; but, believe me, it is much better to leave well-trained dogs behind than to take them out uselessly. They will not think any the worse of you, but, watching you disappear, will swallow their disappointment with that dignity which is the most beautiful thing in all the beautiful dog nature. There is something conscience-striking in the way dogs, and especially shooting-dogs, give their masters credit for always knowing best about everything. Remember this when perhaps you are about to insist angrily on your retriever searching again for a bird you more than suspect is not down at all, and

keep your temper, if only for the reason that if you don't, the trusting creature, true gentleman that he is, will take all the blame to himself, instead of calling you the unreasonable fool you are!

Firstly, then, as to the wind. It may be stated as a general rule that the stronger and colder it blows the less scent it carries, so that your dogs are best left snugly at home in a winter gale. Indeed a strong wind of any temperature is apt to puzzle the best noses. Nothing makes a dog more uncertain and distrustful of himself than being continually checked by scent reaching him in gusts from a hiding bird. It will be noticed that under such conditions even the most accomplished dogs will often be guilty either of a false point or of an unmitigated flush, in either case to their extreme confusion. Nor, naturally, is the reverse of this, a dead calm, very conducive to good work from dogs, though when the air is laden with moisture some dogs, pointers especially, will occasionally mark the seat

of a bird in the most inexplicable manner. Probably, however, there is no such thing as a totally dead calm, though I have seen dogs do useful work on days on which a candle would burn without a flicker in the open air. Frost, too, especially a white frost, is usually injurious to scent, though not to anything like the extent that is commonly imagined. Long rank grass, a favourite resort of snipe in a frost, very often affords excellent scenting in the hardest of weather. So does heather in any but a white frost. I do not know if it be a scientific fact, but I have always noticed that scent is totally destroyed by frost in the vicinity of running water. On the whole, therefore, it is better to go out dogless so long as a frost continues, unless your kennel is a large one and is in want of exercise. Even then the dogs will not enjoy themselves overmuch on the knobby frozen ground. They will also make a prodigious noise crackling through the ice-coated puddles; but this is of small consequence, as snipe never lie about open puddly ground after it has been

bound by frost. When, on the contrary, the ground is very wet, every little depression being full to the brim, and the long grass and rushes heavy with moisture, the decision is much easier to make — no dogs. Nothing cows shooting-dogs more effectually than an all-day soaking. I have known the keenest of pointers after their first run through sodden rushes absolutely decline to hunt any further with a shower-bath accompaniment. Wet ground, of course, involves also splashing around the very lodging-places of the snipe.

It will be seen, from what has been written, that dogs for snipe-shooting have their limitations. Indeed, were it not necessary to give instructions on this head for sportsmen who possess dogs, love them, and are determined to use them, at all events occasionally, I am afraid that the verdict, speaking generally, would have to be against the dog-folk for this particular branch of gunnery—that is to say, that they are as often useless as useful. If intelligently employed, it is true, it is seldom that they are actually harmful. However,

something more than this is necessary to warrant a downright recommendation in their favour. Of course the pleasure of shooting of any sort is vastly enhanced by their assistance ; but that is another matter altogether when the net results to the bag are being considered. My own practice is very simple, and at the risk of incurring the same charge of laying down the law I have deprecated in others, I must confess that it appears to be the most logical one. It is to be accompanied by a *setter* in all weathers, but never to let him range except over wide, open, dryish ground. If I know that my beat for the day contains no such ground, I leave him at home. If the day's walk is over country strange to me I take him, and accept the chance of being able to make use of him, or having to keep him rigorously at heel. If the dog is of fair age, as he should be, and no novice to the gun, as he certainly must not be, he will not be half so miserable at his small share in the day's fun as might be imagined : it is as well, moreover, to stretch a point now and then

by giving him a run, whether it appears likely to be productive or not. I am aware that in deciding for a setter I shall call down upon my head the denunciations of thousands of lovers of his sturdy rival the pointer—alas! in these days in not half so many thousands as could be wished. But if my particular plan and reasons for adopting it be correct, it will be seen that a pointer is not “in it” with a setter, though I readily admit that for all-round shooting the former is equal, if not superior.

In the first place, then, I must have a fast dog. The extensive open moorlands, where alone I propose to use him, do not commonly contain snipe “as thick as leaves in Vallombrosa.” Two or three per acre is about a fair estimate, and to wander about searching for these in a generous allowance of acreage means a deal of wasted time and energy. Now, with a fast, staunch setter, these birds will be marked one by one in an incredibly short space of time, and you may call in your dog on arriving at more enclosed or marshy

country, with the comfortable consciousness that you have taken a pretty accurate census of a scattered rural population with a minimum of exertion. If the dog is not fast, for this work he is not worth taking out. He must fairly gallop if the thing is to be properly done. In fact, for this incidental kind of work, I would not refuse a dog if he possessed great speed and only fair staunchness. But if you are blessed with a dog both fast and staunch, "treasure him, for you have the nonpareil." Now, a pointer is never sufficiently speedy for this purpose, though in staunchness he easily defeats his more impetuous comrade. If you elect to shoot over dogs under any circumstances, well and good—a pointer will do the work thoroughly and conscientiously; but for the method I have described, the only one in my opinion in which full value is obtained from canine assistance, the superior speed and activity of a setter will gain so much valuable time, and save so much to-and-fro tramping, that I must "plump" unreservedly for his employment.

For another reason he will be found the more pleasant companion on a snipe-shooting expedition, namely, his greater imperviousness to wet. As he trots along at his master's heels he will have to take his chance of all sorts of terrible going, and it needs a thick-coated eager animal to preserve his latent force all day until it happens to be wanted. Both these qualities the setter possesses, whereas a pointer, with his short sleek coat, may be reduced to a pitiable condition of shivering after a long struggle through rotten bog or sodden marshes, and nothing is more apt to put a man who loves dogs off his shooting than the knowledge that his friend behind has had enough of it.

Finally, there is no comparison between the qualities of these two splendid breeds of dogs as pals and companions. A pointer is an earnest, laborious fellow, a thorough rustic, and a workman from the blunt of his wonderful nose to the tip of his stiff-pointed stern; but he does not shine in society, and is indeed all the better without it. Whereas

the handsome, graceful "setting dog" is a gentleman first and a sportsman afterwards, which, whether in dogs or human beings, is at all times the pleasantest order of things. He is a little inclined to cringe, perhaps; but if not encouraged in this, there is no more delightful companion either on or off duty, and none more ready for conversation when the labours of the day are over.

In the utter solitude of some snipe-shooting quarters this difference of disposition is not to be despised, though I do not pretend that it is to be weighed too heavily when sitting in judgment in the case of setter *v.* pointer. One word of caution as to the pointer. Never buy a dog which shows undue width of chest, or one whose forelegs show the slightest tendency to bandiness. Such an animal, even if gifted with the best nose in the world, is certain to be a slow mover, and will be a constant source of annoyance. Nothing is more irritating to an active long-striding sportsman (and it is such that shoot most snipe in the year) than being

continually forced to "step short," if not to stop altogether, by a sluggish maundering dog. I have occasionally, when out with a beast of this sort, been goaded into going ahead and leaving the poor chap conscientiously quartering the ground far behind me. It is no use being angry with an animal afflicted with the slows; it should be got rid of as soon as possible, or kept for young partridges in September. The faults of setters are usually of an opposite character. Headstrong and wilful, they will disappear more often in front of you than behind, and their very speed makes them all the more exasperating when it is not restrained by absolute subservience to the gun. A flashy false-pointing brute is a terrible trial to the temper, though I would never despair of a dog at once which developed these vices only at his first entry to snipe. Neither pointers nor setters seem to take kindly to snipe at first. Many a dog which was the pride of the grouse-moor or stubble seems suddenly to become a perfect

object-lesson of "how not to do it" at his initiation into the mysteries of snipe-shooting. The scent of the bird is so strong and peculiar that it takes most dogs some time to get their bearings in the sport. Many indeed, though they may attain a certain standard of excellence, seem never to accommodate themselves altogether to the altered ground, or to overcome what is undoubtedly their astonishment at the effluvium emitted by little *Gallinago*.

I do not intend to enter even briefly into the subject of breaking dogs for this particular sport further than to say that they should never be "broken" to it at all, but must be allowed to train themselves. The very best performer will be a dog which has been well trained to start with, and has been shot over for three or four seasons by good shots at grouse or partridges. If you intend to do much snipe-shooting, it will pay you much better to reserve such a one entirely for the sport, in full vigour and training as he is, than to attempt to

enter a youngster or drag an aged animal into the hardships which the work entails. He may, as I have said, disappoint you at first; but unless he so far forgets himself as actually to chase birds, take no notice, take no notice, and go on taking no notice. It is as reasonable to expect an Irish hunter, unrivalled at the walls and banks of his native isle, to fly the mighty ox-fences of Leicestershire at his first attempt, as that a dog accustomed to methodical quarterings on grouse-moor or turnips should immediately take to the more haphazard methods which are necessary on ground where each quarter of a mile is usually of a diametrically opposite character to the last. Dogs will learn a lot from silence; from vociferous blasphemy they will acquire nothing but distrust of themselves and you. As for the whip, you may as well shoot a setter as thrash him, for all the use he will be to you afterwards. A pointer is less timorous, but more apt to sulk after castigation.

Of special breeds I can say but little. A

good dog on snipe is as likely to be found in one as another. If there be a choice, perhaps the red Irish setter, though the most wilful of his kind, takes the palm for strength and endurance. His ruddy hue, however, will sometimes render him very difficult to distinguish on ground of similar colour. It is annoying to miss your dog for five minutes, then suddenly to flush by your searching and shouting a bird at which he has been "setting" in faultless style within half-a-dozen yards of you, an occurrence I have often witnessed in long grass and heather. A good coloured dog for this work is one in which is a strain of Laverack's old Blue Belton blood. These animals are of a bluish-grey hue, ticked with black and white, and besides showing up well in any ground, are hardy and swift of foot, and I think retain their keenness and hunting powers longer than dogs of other hues.

Just a word of warning about pointers and setters. People not accustomed to shooting-dogs are apt to expect rather too much from

them in the way of intelligence and adaptability to varying circumstances. I am not detracting from the characters of these wonderful aids to mankind when I state that a tyro must expect to find "Ponto" or "Trust" somewhat of a fool in ordinary matters. Things that a spaniel or a terrier will learn almost at once, or will "tumble to" without any learning as occasion demands, will prove a sore puzzle to the highly trained creature, whose very training has tended to make him more or less mechanical and dependent on rote. In fact, the more of a scent-winding automaton, and therefore a better performer, a shooting dog is, the less will he respond to out-of-the-way demands on the part of his master. I should be sorry to have to calculate how much time is wasted by enthusiastic young shooters in attempting to teach their pointers or setters to retrieve, for instance. Certainly, they sometimes partially succeed, though if there be such a thing as a thoroughly good retrieving dog of either breed in England, I have never seen it, and nothing less than

thoroughly good would be of the slightest use in snipe-shooting. In any case, I would be inclined to suspect that the dog had mastered this difficult lesson at the expense of his more legitimate employment. Do not, therefore, try to turn a single-barrelled dog into a double, or put down your money for an animal advertised to retrieve "well and tenderly" unless you have actually seen him not only retrieve, but previously "sett" the game he fetches.

As to the method of approaching the point, it is purely a matter of common-sense, though it is astonishing how often it is set about in the wrong manner. It stands to reason that when your dog brings up short head to wind, marking the lurking-place of a bird to windward of him, it will be to your advantage to get to the windward side of both dog and game, thus getting the latter between you and the dog. This manœuvre has the double advantage of making the snipe hesitate, hemmed in as he is by two unknown dangers, and thus inducing him to

lie a few seconds longer than he might have done, and also, as previously explained, of causing him to throw up towards you when he does spring. As a matter of practice, it is rarely possible to bring off this movement to perfection. Indeed, if snipe are plentiful, it is actually not advisable, as birds might be flushed whilst you were on the way round. Perhaps the best method is to move off a few yards to one side of the line of the dog and the spot you guess the snipe to be lying (of course, as much towards the windward side as possible), and then to edge cautiously along a third side of the triangle, as it were, passing the dog as he stands immovable to leeward of you. Even if the breeze is blowing direct from the invisible bird to the dog's nose, as is not often the case, it is better to act thus than to march straight ahead of the point, as is commonly done. Nothing but experience can teach you how far in front of the point the bird is likely to be lurking. It depends so much upon the day, whether good or bad for scent,

on the humour of the snipe, whether drowsy or alert and fearful, and also on the powers of your dog's nose, exhibiting possibly extraordinary differences of distance on the several days of the week. I may safely say that I have seen a single snipe marked by both pointer and setter at far greater ranges than I ever witnessed with a covey of partridges "jugging" in turnips or long grass, though "Stonehenge," curiously enough, describes the effluvium of a snipe as "weak." It is not, of course, as heavy as that emanating from the door of Rimmel's shop; but it is plainly so peculiar, and, when once got accustomed to, so fascinating to the doggy olfactory nerves, that it can produce the most defined catalepsy (if that theory of the pathognomy of pointing be correct) at distances out of all proportion to the size of the small object to which it belongs. I have previously given some hints on the little understood properties of scent. I have only to add the fact, without pretending to know the reason, that it appears to be far more penetrating

and effective if it comes to your dog on a side-wind than if you were working him directly in the teeth of the breeze, so that, other questions apart, you will find more snipe, and have them more certainly marked for you by your dog when shooting across the wind than by any other method of progression.

Before concluding the subject of dogs, a few words must be said on retrievers. Whether the young sportsman elects to shoot over dogs or not, he should most certainly be accompanied by some member of the canine race accomplished in the art and craft of rescuing wounded or dead birds from places inaccessible to his master. The varieties of dog which will do this are so many that it is impossible to advise definitely upon any particular species. It may, however, be said that the actual Retriever, the big black intelligent fellow of the coverts, is perhaps the worst of all for the purposes of the snipe-shooter. Besides, it offends one's sense of proportion to see an insignificant little bird hanging from the enormous jaws

of Don, even if the brown eyes twinkling with enjoyment above are the wisest and most beautiful of any that beam from the head of created beast. Nothing can beat a spaniel for this work, if (and it is an important *if*) one can be obtained which does not chase, which will keep to heel, which does not whine or yelp with excitement, which does not maul the game about when retrieving it, or will not devour it altogether when out of sight of his master! Given a good spaniel, with few or none of these deficiencies, you have a hardy, absolutely untirable little fellow who can go anywhere, who simply revels in cold and wet so long as the halts are not over long, and to whom rough sport with the gun is a perfect monomania,—who possesses, besides, the most delightfully companionable qualities when both he and gun are off duty for a while.

Of spaniels perhaps the Irish variety—in reality no true spaniel at all, by the way—is the best, a quaint creature rejoicing in a whimsical expression and an absurd-looking

top-knot : with him the young shooter should make an early acquaintance if he has not already done so, for no more useful animal can be found anywhere. Poodles, too (of course not the barber-trimmed absurdity of Hyde Park), have performed admirably as retrievers, and are keen and hardy, besides being amongst the most intelligent of their race. Even terriers can be taught this useful accomplishment, and if properly trained there could be no better animals for the work, as they are built on just the wire and whipcord lines which most "professional" retrievers lack. Mr Abel Chapman mentions an Airedale in his possession which was a great success at gathering ducks shot from "hides" on the ooze, compared to which amusement even snipe-shooting is comfort and luxury. In fact, as I have said, any dog will do, if what is certainly the natural instinct of "fetching" can be disciplined to the sportsman's needs. It will occasionally be found that dogs, perfect retrievers perhaps at other game, will at first evince the greatest dislike to carrying

the corpse of a snipe for any distance, evidently, if well-broken animals, to their great shame and distress. Nothing is more irritating than to watch your dog gingerly carrying a dead bird in the very end of his lips and finally dropping it, perhaps on the far side of an unjumpable dyke. Sir Ralph Payne Gallwey, in his beautiful third volume of 'Letters to Young Shooters,'—certainly the most practical and comprehensive work on wildfowl that has appeared since Colonel Hawker's famous volume,—recommends starving a dog thus afflicted "until he will munch the bones of a snipe for his dinner." It will seldom be necessary to adopt so drastic a measure, as the dislike in most instances soon wears off, and in any case the leg of a cold snipe¹ during the halt for luncheon, proffered

¹ The very best and most manageable luncheon that the shooter can take out. The birds should be a little overcooked, and eaten with brown bread and butter dusted with a little pepper and salt. To those who, like the writer, cannot "abide" sandwiches, two jack-snipe thus prepared will make the midday meal a thing to look forward to, even on a wet day in the middle of a bog. For drink, a flask of claret: spirits are clammy on the marshes.

with much pomp and circumstance, will usually be effective in convincing the dog of the excellence of the despised morsel. Very rarely, and only as far as my experience goes in the case of spaniels, the distaste to snipe either as game or "grub" is incurable even by the starving process, and though the poor creature may in his hunger devour the repulsive food, he will never retrieve snipe kindly, or without so much fuss and face-making that more time will be lost than gained by his services.

As to the care and treatment of snipe-shooting dogs, it does not differ materially from that of dogs for other sports except in amount. It may be said that, however much attention you have been in the habit of bestowing upon your doggy friends after a day at grouse or partridges, about twice the amount of rubbing, fresh straw about twice as often, and even twice the amount of dinner, will be required to keep them in sound health and keenness. Snipe-shooting is cold weary work, demanding very much more of a dog's vital energy than any other sport with the gun. Except at the

very beginning of a season, do not be afraid of over-feeding. Dogs in hard condition cannot have too much nourishing food, though a daily mass of pulpy biscuit will do more harm than good. Give them plenty of meat, boiled calf's head or bullock's liver is the best, with a good-sized bone, too large to be easily crushed, for them to amuse themselves upon and improve teeth and digestion when the meal is over. A bone is the contemplative dog's recreation.

If a dog returns very exhausted from shooting, it is as well not to give him his dinner at once, but immediately after his rubbing, to let him lap a basin of broken biscuit, soaked in warm milk, not putting his meat before him until an hour or so has elapsed, during which he may have rested and comforted himself on his dry straw. A dog thoroughly done up will either refuse his food altogether or bolt it so carelessly that it will be wasted, or actually harmful, besides which the fever of mind and body caused by a long day's exciting toil must be allowed to subside

before the animal will be in condition to benefit by his meal.

See that all thorns and ticks (which simply swarm upon dogs in the early part of a mild winter) are carefully removed before a dog is allowed to leave the hands of his rubber. The latter pests will be found clinging chiefly to a dog's fore parts, and especially behind the ears, no doubt being collected as his chest and shoulders brush through the long grass: if suffered to remain, they will grow to an enormous size, causing no end of irritation and loss of much needed rest. They may easily be felt by passing the fingers through the coat. In rubbing down, especial attention should be paid to the spaces between the toes, as the whole condition of the feet depends on these parts being kept thoroughly clean and dry. It will be noticed that a dog returning dirty and wet from shooting will always commence his toilet, if left to himself, by licking first his feet, then his legs, then his loins and belly, indicating the order of things on which, to his own mind, his comfort depends.

A very important question to the dog-owner is the amount of work he may expect from his kennel—*i.e.*, how many days a-week each dog should be taken out. This is a difficult question to answer definitely, owing to the varying strength and temperaments of individual animals; but I think it will be found that if the sportsman really means business—that is, shoots steadily day after day when the snipe are about, and from morn to eve,—two days a-week for pointers or setters, and perhaps three for his retrievers, whatever they may be, will be found enough. It is rarely possible in snipe-shooting to relieve the team by fresh dogs at midday, as is often done on a grouse-moor; and even if possible, it is doubtful if it would be advantageous, as it would only mean four wet and more or less tired dogs instead of two at the close of the day. So that a team for a thoroughly well-equipped snipe-shooting expedition would not be over-dogged with three pointers or setters and a couple of retrievers. With great care in

sparing dogs in their work, and barring casualties (which it is never quite safe to do), perhaps two of the former and a single retriever will carry you through, though this is certainly the irreducible minimum. Of course, I am speaking of working but a single dog at a time. In my experience it is a waste of energy and material to shoot snipe over a brace of pointers or setters, in spite of all the beauties of "backing," &c. Two dogs naturally make twice the disturbance that one would do, the ground is rarely favourable to concerted action, and though more birds may be marked on wide open stretches of moorland, probably not one per cent more will be bagged, taking all the year through, than if but a single dog were employed.



CHAPTER VI.

HABITS AND HABITAT OF SNIPE.

WHEN you flush a snipe from a particular patch of ground, wet or dry, you may be sure that he has lain there for one or both of two reasons, namely, because of the shelter

or the food that the spot afforded him. As with all wild creatures, the search for these two conditions is the aim and object of the bird's existence. On the success or failure of its quest, therefore, depends the success or failure of the shooter's sport.

If a bit of marshland, desirable in every way to the human eye, is lacking in one of these essentials, the snipe will only patronise it for the single necessity it supplies. If it lacks both, they will not patronise it at all, any more than you would go into a shop which contains nothing that you want to buy. The whole question of where to seek the birds reduces itself to the ancient one of supply and demand, so that the indignant astonishment often heard from unthinking sportsmen who have plunged all day for nothing through what *they* consider a simply ideal snipe-bog is as foolish as it is ignorant. You may be quite certain that if there are any snipe in the vicinity at all, which is another consideration altogether, they have assuredly made a visit of inspection to the

vacant ground, and have concluded that it was not worth the trouble of pegging out their small claims upon.

It does not at all follow that they will not come there just when you are grumbly giving up looking for them—*i.e.*, at nightfall. For the two things snipe require—a sheltered residence and a well-spread table—they require, like a *café*-haunting Frenchman, at different times. So that your vain search for the birds on this splendid-looking stretch of marsh brings us to one broad rule that may be laid down before considering its exceptions—that snipe naturally and preferably feed at night, and rest in the daytime under ordinary conditions. *Ergo*, it is no use to look for them by day in a place which supplies board only, and not lodging. The tract that is snipeless at midday may be alive with them twelve hours later. But that is of no use to any one but a cat or a poacher: you want to discover the favoured localities where the birds can sleep in warmth and security, or, better still, where, like Jorrocks, they can

both dine and sleep, for then, as they have not had to make a post-prandial flight in search of bed, they are more likely to be full-fed and drowsy, and will probably lie better to your gun.

It is impossible to decide from inspection which may be these ideal spots. Their advantages are nearly always as invisible as their drawbacks to the eye of man, and local experience alone can guide the sportsman in this respect. As hinted previously, however, the vagaries of the snipe, subject as they are to the state of mind and body of the bird itself, to say nothing of the antics of the barometer and climatic conditions generally, so often throw all experience, local and general, to the winds, that it is almost hopeless to give any absolutely reliable "tips" as to the particular ground and particular day on which the snipe-shooter may expect sport.

One of the most puzzling enigmas of all is that of which almost every snipe-walk and snipe-shooting experience can supply instances. A place which last year, nay, last

week, held not a single bird by day or night, through which indeed we scarcely took the trouble of sending the dog whilst on our way to more promising spots, is one fine morning found crowded with snipe, sheltering behind tussocks of grass or reed, which never seemed of any use in this way before. Nothing can be gathered from your diary as to the cause of this influx. The same wind has prevailed before; it is unlikely that worms have suddenly appeared in mud which hitherto, judging by the best of all signs, the absence of feeding snipe, has been innocent of them.

Up to the end of November these sudden and transitory visitants (for they take but a few hours' lease) may of course be a further batch of foreign recruits to the stock of home-bred birds which have been about all the summer. But the constant recurrence of the phenomenon, after the supply from northern lands has ceased, renders it impossible that these welcome additions can be, as they are invariably considered to be,

flights newly landed from abroad. They must rather be the results of a local migration, possibly from distant points of these islands, possibly from the next parish, from whence they have been driven by failure of the food-supply, overcrowding, persecution, perhaps caprice, or any other conceivable reason. Not having had time to make a tour of exploration for the best haunts the strange district affords, the snipe are merely resting after their flight, and you had better attack them *instantly*, for they will speedily be gone. Birds found in this intermittent fashion in a certain bit of marsh will either lie as close as stones, or rise in wisps at half a mile. There will be nothing of what artists call a middle distance. The former in a snipe invariably points to one of two conditions—it is either tired after a journey, or drowsing after a heavy meal; the latter to uneasiness, caused by something more than an empty stomach.

To throw light on these questions, I have many times made nightly visits to such fickle

spots, both after they had been untenanted by day and when birds in profusion had been flushed from them, and have without exception found them snipeless. This is almost certain proof of a lack of food-supply, and such places will never be inhabited except as *dâk-bungalows*¹ by the belated travellers, who are either too weary to look farther afield for better quarters, or finding their arrival to coincide with the approach of day, prefer to remain *impransus* but secure until returning night comes to cover their foraging. In the first case they lie close and well; in the second, they are not only nervous but are crouching all together, listening for the faintest sound, and ready to dash up in a frightened crowd when anything—even a cow—moves in their vicinity.

I once witnessed one of these sudden appearances and departures of snipe, which occurred late in December in a large rushy field on the banks of the river Wey. Re-

¹ Rest-houses on the Indian roads, into which the traveller overtaken by night turns for shelter.

turning late and laden from a foray amongst the pike of that prolific little river, a sound like that of a distant winnowing-machine arose suddenly in the air, and looking upward I was astonished to see a flock of at least three hundred snipe sweep over my head and alight in the very field in which I walked. There was a bright full moon; their long bills were strongly silhouetted as the birds drifted like a puff of dark smoke across the silver surface; except for the velvety rustle of many wings, they flew in profound silence only a few yards above me. Next afternoon I was in the same place again, and was much interested to see the owner of the land just about to walk the field with his gun as I arrived. He put up only three snipe from the ground which, for one night at least, must have held as many hundreds, and bagging all three was mightily pleased at his good fortune. The Recording Angel has not so many good actions down to my account that I can afford to forego laying a little flattering unction to my soul

that I mercifully refrained from spoiling his pleasure by telling him of the cohorts which must have broken camp and evacuated his domain but a few hours earlier. But even had he come down upon them like the Assyrian, his bag would probably have been but little heavier, for it is ten to one that the three hundred would have risen as one bird, with one shrill *vox et præterea nihil*, leaving him gazing (I invoke the First Offender's Act) wispfully after them!

When snipe rise thus in wisps, it is generally worth while to stand still until they have finished their aërial manœuvres, and mark them down as they drop singly (which they will nearly always do) into different nooks and corners that they have spied from above. If the birds rise thus day after day from any place, station a man in a commanding position, with orders to mark the descending birds for you. Some countrymen are marvellously clever at this, and will retain in their memory almost to an inch the lurking-place of at least half a score of birds which

have left their fellows in mid air in this manner. In the case mentioned above, however, that of the terrified strangers, I have never found it of any use to wait for the wisp to disintegrate and its individuals to seek the ground one by one. After a few preliminary circlings, they usually depart in a body out of the range of vision, which seems to lend colour to what I have already surmised, their ignorance of the immediate locality and its haunts. In all other cases, however, unless snipe are very plentiful, many more shots will be obtained if the sportsman accustom himself to pause perfectly motionless until the bird or birds he has flushed have either flown out of sight or again sought the earth.

Snipe always seem to be undecided little creatures on the wing, whether in wisps or alone. You may put up a bird which dashes off with a business-like air, as if bound straight for a preconcerted haven especially noted for such emergencies. The young shooter is apt to be taken in and

to regard the departing bird as, if not exactly lost, yet gone most decidedly before. But this "I know exactly where I am going" deportment is the hollowest of frauds. Keep your eyes on the receding speck, and before it has gone many yards you will see symptoms of hesitation. First a dart to the left, then to the right; no! perhaps it would be safer to keep straight on; or how would it be to emulate the bank rate, and get as high as possible in the shortest time! So up he soars, like a brown, blown leaf, mastering the wind with infinite grace of movement, as if ascending to the heavens by an invisible spiral staircase, only to flit aimlessly about high overhead, screaming intermittently, making finally an arrowy head-foremost plunge downwards, perhaps to a spot within fifty yards of that from which he rose. Yet it must not be inferred that our snipe is a fool. Milne Edwards, and I believe Michelet, profess to seeing stupidity stamped on the features of all the Scolopacidæ; but the baffled

sportsman will often confess that *Gallinago* at any rate often most thoroughly belies his appearance. There are few birds more wary, and none quicker to take advantage of any assistance to escape offered by surroundings: a projection from a bush, the lip of a boulder, a little pillar of reed stems, it is miraculous how he perceives and uses their shelter when whizzing along in full career, turning behind them, perhaps at right angles, with more certainty at forty miles an hour than you could do at four. In his power of taking or leaving cover he is the Boer of bird-dom!

One idiosyncrasy, however, he has which will often give you a second chance at him: he can see no danger in a motionless object. This failing seems common to nearly all wild creatures. Only keep still and the most timid of fauna will often go on unconcernedly with any business they have in hand, and delightful business it is to witness. When waiting for the duck to flight at dusk or dawn, I have often had even

that most suspicious of fowl, the curlew, poking about in the ooze within ten yards of my unconcealed but motionless form. Once I sat by a lonely farmyard pond in company with a Shoveller drake, and three or four Full Snipe, who were running about amongst and actually *quarrelling* with the domestic ducks, the proper lords of the manor of mud along the edge! Whenever a snipe, then, which has gone away untouched or unsaluted, is zigzagging dubiously about overhead as described above, stand "motionless as ice," even though one leg be thigh-deep in mud and the other cocked up on an inconveniently high tussock. It is quite on the cards that he will suddenly swoop to the ground so close to you that you may miss him, as I have often done, from his very proximity.

Movement of the face and eyes, though all else be motionless, seems particularly alarming to snipe; indeed the sight of a man's face appears to inspire a most uncomplimentary aversion in all wild creatures,

more than any other portion of the human form divine. Mr Cholmondeley-Pennell relates a singular instance of this. One of the most successful fishers of that wariest and keenest-sighted of plebeians, the Chub, informed him that the gratifying weights of his catches were due almost entirely to his plan of covering his face with a sort of mask when approaching his quarry. "If he attempted the same process unmasked, the Chub were instantly alarmed and ceased biting, or made off altogether."¹ I do not suggest that the sportsman is to stalk the marshes with his manly features vizored like those of a racing motorist; but he will do well on occasions to put on the mask of absolute stillness, which will be almost as effectual, and not half so terrifying to any superstitious bumpkin who may happen to catch sight of him. Of course, if birds are plentiful, it would be waste of time to spend five precious minutes of a short winter's day waiting for every soaring snipe to make up

¹ The Sporting Fish of Great Britain.

its mind to give you another shot. Occasionally, moreover, the snipe will be in a much more decided humour, scuttling off best pace at once, on a bee-line for the horizon, and dispensing altogether with aërial calisthenics. Other days, they will rise just out of shot time after time, and fly but a foot or two before alighting,—a most irritating procedure ; other days, again (rare and red-letter days these), they will wait to be kicked up, and yet other days they will allow you to pass them, and then bounce up *behind* you so constantly that you feel that the only way to negotiate them must be that which was once urged upon me by an Irish gossoon,—to walk the moors backwards !

It is all a matter of—I was about to say of weather, but the more I think of it the more impossible it seems to lay down any laws at all as to what it *is* a matter of. It is scarcely even a matter of experience, for snipe will give the lie time after time even to this comprehensive possession. In this

respect they are the trout amongst game birds; they will act differently in the same place, under identical conditions of weather, on every one of the six days of a week. Then perhaps for a fortnight they may seem to have adopted at last a certain line of conduct, rising consistently wild, lying close, or bundling off in a mob as the case may be, giving you to understand that they are showing you what they mean to do in future, and that you may make your arrangements accordingly. In the light of this you proceed to attack them in a certain manner, and it is ten to one that they defeat you by the one device you have not provided for.

I remember once being thoroughly "bested" in this way by the denizens of a certain very rotten two acres of marsh which lay in a hollow surrounded by high hills. The place held hundreds of snipe, and for several years I had tried every method of circumventing them, always with the same result. No sooner was the first shot fired than from

all parts of the bog crowds of screaming snipe rose like a noisy exhalation, and, making invariably straight for the shoulder of a mountain, disappeared from view, leaving not half a dozen of their kind behind. I tried them down the wind, against the wind, across the wind; sometimes I walked slowly and carefully, sometimes endeavoured to surprise them with a rush, always with the same failure. Then I posted a sharp-eyed man up on the mountain, and, after insulting him by not believing his report, went there myself whilst he flushed the birds. Neither he nor I was ever able to mark down even a solitary individual of that tremendous wisp.

At last I determined to try a drive. One rough windy day, with infinite caution, I made my way to a point up-wind, in the hopes that a greater part of the flock at least would be forced to pass over my head as they fought with the gale. My man remained on the down-wind side, with orders to advance towards me slowly, and with as little noise as

possible. When in position I raised my gun as a signal and came to the "ready," determined to do or die, meaning, if necessary or possible, to fire into the brown of the mighty rush of snipe I expected. Oh, the agony of that next quarter of an hour! The birds lay like dead things before my advancing driver. One by one they rose, fifteen yards in front of him; but they came not nigh me, turning instead, with devilish cunning, back over his gunless person. In a short time I could stand it no longer, and, waving to him to stop, advanced myself into the bog. In an instant, before a shot was fired, two thousand birds were up and away. I got off two barrels, killing a right and left, but not another bird did we put up from that place. Many times subsequently did we try that drive in the course of the old round of experiments, with varying, but never even moderate, success; and to this day I confess myself thoroughly defeated by those two acres of quaggy ground and their teeming inhabitants.

The vagaries of snipe are not, however, always so inexplicable as this. They are, in fact, chiefly due to the weather, in so far as it affects their feeding. As before stated, they prefer to dine at night, and, given a bill of fare, require, like human diners, two more things for comfort—light and quiet. If either or both of these are wanting, they will make but an unsatisfactory meal, perhaps will not feed at all, in which case, unlike their cousin the Woodcock, they will then devote the following day to making up overdue supplies. This is the great law governing their movements from the shooter's point of view. Snipe cannot see in the dark: the brighter the night the greater their success in finding the spots where worms abound.

There is a great deal of nonsense talked about the influence of the moon on wild birds. Some people seem to imagine that it exercises a sort of occult influence on their spirits, as it was once supposed to do on those of human beings. You may often hear, too, especially from keepers and other unlearned folk, whose

life is spent amongst our game birds, remarks disclosing a belief that the luminary has powers affecting the migration of birds to these shores, very similar to those it possesses over the tides of the ocean. The idea is not unnatural, for the comings and goings of our migratory game must seem mysterious enough to the unscientific to warrant any number of fantastic theories about their allegiance to the Queen of the Night.

But the truth, though less romantic, is more intelligible. Birds are strict utilitarians, and see no reason for blundering about in the dark when at certain seasons a great lamp arises to guide them to their objective. In the case of migration, however, it does occasionally happen that a considerable arrival of birds may occur on the darkest of nights. I expect that the explanation of this is to be found in the rapid changes of the appearance of the skies in Great Britain, from moonlit brilliance one night to gloom the next. I do not believe that birds would start on their voyage across the sea if they foresaw that

their landing-place would be shrouded in darkness. According to their calculations (there are numberless proofs of their power to divine far distant atmospheric conditions) there should be a moon on the night of their arrival, and they are much disconcerted when they find themselves on a strange shore in pitch darkness. Any one who has had the fortune to fall in with a newly arrived flight of Woodcock near the sea-coast has to thank the invariable darkness of the previous night for his extraordinary sport. Had there been a moon the birds, tired as they were, would probably have dispersed inland instead of remaining so unnaturally sociable on the first bit of dry land they came to.

To return to our snipe, the same thing holds good. It must have light of some sort, whether of the moon or of the stars, for both its migration and its feeding. For the latter occupation it prefers quiet, though it is not absolutely necessary. A wild night is an abomination to a snipe. Like all birds it detests at any time being buffeted about,

and having its feathers blown all over the place; but when the occasion entails such exposure, as does the great question of dinner on an open marsh, the bird nearly always elects to postpone feeding altogether until daylight brings either calm, or at least a better chance of finding food without so much trotting and flitting about.

Unlike many birds, snipe are wildest and most alert when in quest of food, so that when a very dark or tempestuous night forces them to put off feeding until daylight, you will usually find them almost unapproachable during the morning hours of the next day. Indeed, if time be no object and the loss of a day does not matter, it would be far better to leave them undisturbed on such occasions, and to turn home after a sufficient number of snipe have risen at impossible distances to convince you that they have got all their eyes about them, primarily for worms, but incidentally for you. Nothing is more likely to make birds permanently suspicious, if not to drive them away altogether, than

harassing them at their hours of feeding. By day snipe will feed in the roughest of weather; by night I believe they seldom do unless it is fairly calm. I have several times seen them at it in a wild gale, and a very uncomfortable occupation it appears.

Perhaps the ideal day for snipe-shooting is one on which a moderate, warm, south-west wind is blowing, the previous night having been calm and moonlit, or, better still, illuminated by bright starlight. Such days after such nights are of course rare; so, consequently, are these ideal times for making a bag. Another sort of day which I have usually found conducive to sport is a sunny, cheerful one, with a strongish north-east wind, —exactly the opposite, you will observe, of the former kind mentioned. However, in snipe-shooting it never does to despair because of apparently unsuitable weather. Any weather may be ideal for all you know; heavy bags have been made on the most discouraging-looking days.

During every kind of weather between

the two extremes mentioned above sport *may* be had. A glance out of window in the morning should never be allowed to decide the day's plans. There is only one really bad time for walking after snipe, and that is during the first few days of a white frost. They are then, in my experience, always wild and collected in wisps. Shooting had better be postponed until the warm moist weather which invariably follows that Christmas-card-looking appearance caused by what Colonel Hawker called "atmospheric arsenic." Neither, unless you are pushed for time, is it advisable to sally forth during heavy rain. Apart from the personal discomfort, the snipe will very likely be uneasy, your dogs will be miserable, and if you do manage to make a bag the game will be wet, and draggled, and unfit to send away to your friends. There is nothing more hideous than a bundle of drenched snipe.

Equally with climatic conditions does the nature of the ground composing your beat affect the disposition of the birds. Generally

speaking, the drier its general condition the better sport will you have. If the district, as is commonly the case with snipe-ground, contains something of everything, it will usually be found that more birds will be *shot* on the drier portions, though more may be *seen* on the quagmires, for wet ground means splashing of both yourself and your dog. Wildfowl of all sorts are even more suspicious of the sounds than of the sight of an intruder, and no sound carries farther on a still day than that of a man plashing through shallow water.

But the places where snipe are usually at their very wildest are those shaky oozy bogs into which the sportsman sinks thigh-deep at every step, such as that which gave me daily occupation and defeat as described above. Noise cannot be the explanation in this case, for the skilful bogtrotter's advance in such spots may be as noiseless as if he were treading thick grass. The snipe-shooter will constantly meet with places of this description in his wanderings, very often of

only an acre in extent, in the midst perhaps of thousands of acres of firmer soil. They are not uncommonly found about the sources of streams, and invariably hold a vast population of snipe. The suddenness with which every bird will leap up from every portion of the bog, very often before he has hardly set foot upon it at all, much less fired a shot, is inconceivable to the tyro, and not easily explained by any one. It is probable that instantaneous news of an enemy's approach is Marconigrammed all over the marsh to the sleeping birds by the quivering of the jelly-like ground beneath them. Even a light footfall along an apparently firm river-bank will often cause similar widespread alarm and scurry amongst fish. Snipe may lie after they have seen you, they may do so even when they have heard your voice; but your slow progress over shuddering morass they never await.

CHAPTER VII.

HABITS AND HABITAT OF SNIPE—*continued.*

It will be noticed in the preceding description of some of the typical haunts of snipe how very much the birds are inclined to resort in numbers to the same spot, to the neglect by even solitary individuals of less favoured marshes and moors. This might seem to imply that the snipe is a gregarious bird, delighting to feed and sleep in company with its kind. This, in my opinion, it certainly is not. Except on migration or when pairing in the spring, I do not believe that the presence of its kind in a certain place is the least attraction to a passing snipe. It is essentially a solitary creature, as is proved by the constant discovery of single birds day after day in an isolated patch of rushes or

grass, perhaps a mile away from the nearest *Gallinago*. A gregarious bird would never bring itself to dwell in loneliness like this, unless indeed it were wounded, for then company-loving fowl of all sorts are wont to thrust the sufferer out from their midst, to exist miserably alone until it either perishes or recovers sufficiently to come up to the standard of activity required by its fellows.

Another sure proof to my mind of the natural solitude of the snipe is the complete absence of unanimity observable when a number of birds are on the wing together. There is no formation, no discipline, so to speak; they are a mere mob fleeing together from a common danger. This is not surprising if we consider what I believe to be the purely fortuitous nature of these gatherings, which when in the air are called wisps. In my opinion there is no such thing as a wisp *on the ground* (an Irishism that may be forgiven in connection with such a staunch little Hibernian as the snipe)—that is, using the word wisp in the sense of a voluntary collec-

tion for companionship's sake. If a few square yards of ground hold fifty birds, it is, to quote a remark of John Bickerdyke's upon the pike, "the surroundings and not the society that have brought them together," and it may be added, that cause them to take for a time the same line of escape.

How different is the case with birds naturally gregarious—wild ducks or geese, for instance. Nothing in nature is more astonishing than the beautiful regularity of a large flight of these splendid wildfowl. From the absolute orderliness with which they change places, wheel, or swoop, or soar together, there seems to be a sort of telegraphic communication between the leaders of the vast flock and their following, the tail of which may be many yards in rear. This drill is even more admirable in those countless myriads of birds so apparently unintellectual as starlings, which sometimes darken the sky with their manœuvring battalions. Such a gift is obviously the provision of Nature for the preservation of order and cohesion in creatures she

has designed to move about in mighty gatherings at great speed. Who has ever seen an unwounded mallard suddenly leave his place in the team, and drop selfishly into a sheltered nook he has espied below?

But it is to this absence of sociability that the snipe-shooter owes a great part of his sport. Many a couple of snipe may be picked up if a previous acquaintance with locality has taught us the odd corners favoured by single birds. They nearly always lie well in such spots, and if missed will return in a very short time. I have fired at birds thus, and before I have moved from the spot have known them swoop head-foremost down again within a yard or two of their original position. More often than not, however, they do not actually alight if you are still in possession, but will check their flight when within an inch of the ground, and with a rapid head - and - tail movement shoot upwards again as if propelled by a spring. However, they give you a second shot, and you can ask no more. If such a

spot is a harbour for three or four birds, and you kill a couple, you are very likely to have another chance at the others. On some days they appear dazed at the loss of their comrades, and will pitch again at no great distance, lying well at your next approach.

I remember once shooting, without moving an inch, every member of a little colony of six snipe which inhabited a wet corner of a field. I never knew birds lie better, or rise in a more artistic manner for the accomplishment of that desirable feat, a "right and left," than the first four. Firstly two rose simultaneously, one behind the other, and both fell dead; then—just giving me time to reload—up got the next couple, with the same result. The fifth was a cunning bird, and sprang just as I had inserted one of the two cartridges I held in my fingers. He too fell, and the sixth bird, who I verily believe had gauged the situation with his little round eyes, sprang exultingly before my empty gun. Something—perhaps the disappearance of his companions—seemed

to throw him out altogether, and, to my astonishment, after an undecided sort of flutter, he pitched like a very Jack a few yards farther on, only to fall in a moment to my sixth barrel. All these birds were in splendid condition, and were *feeding*, as a long red worm protruding from the bill of one of them, the last but one, proved. The same thing in a less marked manner has often happened to me before.

In a frost a greater portion of the day's walk described in an earlier chapter would be so much waste of time. It will then be useless to seek sport on the wet levels; they will be frozen as hard as iron, and as impervious to the delicate bills of the birds. Even a temporary thaw would not make matters much better, for it would have to be of some duration to bring the worms, which have retired to the depths again, to the surface. The spots to make for now are the sides of unfrozen streams, and, above all, the small places which springs keep moist and warm throughout the severest weather.

Even these may fail you in the daytime, unless the frost is severe, for, unless there is good cover handy, snipe will not remain by them in daylight, but may lie up in all sorts of odd places, and flight at night to their feeding-ground.

There are no occasions when local experience is more valuable to the snipe-shooter than during the various phases of a frost. Snipe are kittle-cattle at the best of times, but at the advent of hard weather their uncertainty baffles even the already little-known laws which govern their movements and their commissariat. The general rule is the perfectly logical one stated above—*i.e.*, that snipe will avoid frozen ground and resort of necessity to spots kept soft by running water or perennial springs. But though there can be no exception to this natural law if snipe are to remain alive, it does not at all follow that a district abounding in both snipe and streams will afford sport in a frost. I know of such places, perfect networks of rivulets and warm quaggy springs, that the first touch of the cold

breath of winter is sufficient to denude entirely of the stock of birds which had rendered the locality a snipe-shooter's paradise so long as the weather remained open. Especially is this the case along the little-known tracts of snipe-ground that fringe the seaboard of Wales and the west of England,—tracts which in early winter do not yield in prolificness, mile for mile, to the endless bogs of the Emerald Isle itself. The most arctic winters within the memory of man have not been able to bind these springs and watercourses in the grip of ice. Were this the case, the sudden evacuation of the snipe might be considered as the result of instinct warning the birds to flee from even the possibility of starvation. But I am unwilling to believe that any wild birds can be affected by the premonition of such a groundless danger. The fact remains, however, that in places such as I describe the sportsman may, during hard weather, wander all day along the soft margins of rivers and springs, protected by what was in happier times excellent cover, and yet never spring

a snipe to gladden his eyes, though he may see duck and teal in quite unaccustomed profusion and tameness.

It is almost beyond doubt that, on our western coast at any rate, the clue to the whereabouts (though not to the *cause* of the departure) of the birds is to be found in the proximity of Ireland. The slight advantage in geniality the climate of that country possesses over that prevalent on the shores of England washed by the St George's Channel may be sufficient to induce the snipe to put themselves on the safe side.

Whether this is the case or not, a frost in England is invariably followed by a sudden disappearance of snipe from many parts of the country and a corresponding increase of sport in the Sister Isle. So well known is this that many writers on snipe-shooting have been led into the error of laying down as a universal rule one which is only partially applicable even to Ireland. Thus Colonel Hawker in his short account of the sport, perhaps the least satisfactory por-

tion of his classic book, has the following sentence: "After a frost has brought the snipe into the country, you are pretty sure of good sport on the first open windy day that follows it." So you would be if frosts did invariably bring birds into the country; but the truth is that they just as often drive every snipe out of it, using the word country—as it is presumed Colonel Hawker uses it—in the sense of locality.

The young sportsman who is looking out for winter snipe-shooting quarters will do well therefore to make careful inquiries from sportsmen, *not* from countrymen or hotel-keepers, of the effect of frost on the snipe population of the district he is considering. I have known and experienced many cases of grievous disappointment from neglect of this preliminary, entailing that most unsatisfactory of all retrospects, a long-looked-for and wasted shooting holiday.

The reason why I do not advise taking counsel with the people excepted is that, self interest apart, the lower orders are rarely ob-

servant enough to be able to give a trustworthy report of the abundance or the reverse of any particular species in their locality. They are, besides, almost to a man imbued with the idea to start with that hard weather means hosts of game. How often after a bad day's snipe-shooting have I heard the man carrying my cartridge-bag administer the stereotyped consolation, "Ah, sir, you should be here in hard weather!" when I knew full well that in that place during a frost twice the amount of walking would not have produced even half the scanty day's bag. On the bucolic mind unwonted abundance of many sorts of wildfowl produces the impression of abundance of all, and the presence of snipe is taken for granted amongst the companies of duck and plover which the winter weather has forced to congregate on favourable spots from their usual widely scattered haunts. Even in places to which snipe do resort in a frost, they are uneasy and fearful, and only a small percentage of those seen will be bagged.

The lot of all birds which seek their sustenance by boring is a hard one in an "old-fashioned winter," though many make shift to eke out a living by other methods. But the snipe, even when face to face with starvation, seems unable to adapt himself to the cruel conditions he has flown so far to avoid. No wonder, then, that he has as holy a horror as a fox-hunter of hard ground. To the man fuming over his half-dozen fattening hunters it means only cessation of sport, but to the sporting little bird the horrible prospect of absolute stoppage of supplies. So that the vast majority of our snipe take very good care to be off before the door of their larder is locked upon them, performing a second and most unwilling migration southward to more genial climes. Some indeed linger until the strength necessary for a long flight has left them, no doubt hoping against hope for the appearance of the welcome thaw. In a frost of any duration these unfortunates perish in hundreds. A letter from

that good novelist and sportsman Mr Rider Haggard in 'The Globe' details his experiences in one of the islands of the Hebrides during the terrible winter of 1890-91, — a black year indeed in the memory of all birds. He writes : "The keeper there told me that he picked up many of them dead or dying by the side of the frozen water-courses ; indeed the snipe on that island, where they used to swarm,¹ are only now beginning to recover in numbers from the effects of that year of desolation."

In my experience, however, only the most sudden of visitations can catch the snipe napping in such numbers as this. Indeed they are if anything quicker than other

¹ I presume Mr Haggard means swarm during the nesting season. It is unlikely that severe weather in these islands would seriously reduce the yearly supply of migratory snipe, though it might, as he relates, depopulate an island dependent almost entirely on its own stock of breeding birds. In a previous part of the letter quoted he says, "One such frost, as I believe, kills out more snipe and woodcock than are disposed of by shooting in ten years." This is only very partially true, for, as I have stated, only a small minority of belated birds remain as victims to the rigour of the weather, the wiser majority having departed early far from the reach of frost.

boring birds to accept notice to quit, certainly more so than the Woodcock, which often struggles on through the hardest frosts for a time, picking up a precarious and unaccustomed living from the frozen surface of the earth—a thing a snipe has never been known to do. This is all the more strange by reason of the fact that the Woodcock is actually more susceptible to the temperature of the air itself, apart from the condition of the ground, than its smaller relative. Thus I have twice picked up an unwounded Woodcock, fairly numbed and immovable from the intense cold, on the very margin of a spring, from which one or two snipe have darted away with their usual activity, apparently revelling in the keen still air so long as their larder was not closed to them.

Another cause which will occasionally greatly reduce the number of snipe in a district is the occurrence of floods, but this not to anything like the extent that a frost will do. As a rule, rather than forsake a favourite marsh, the birds will crowd together on the scattered

tufts and tussocks which even in the worst floods usually stick up high and dry above the surface of the water.

It is seldom, however, that good sport is to be looked for when Mr Snipe is reduced to huddling uncomfortably with his kind on a resting - place whose dimensions must be measured in inches. Everything is against the sportsman. In the first place, the mere fact of their being together in numbers in a small space is enough to render the inhabitants of each little island unapproachable, even if the attack did not involve much splashing and floundering through the surrounding water. Secondly, I have always noticed that the sound of a shot echoing over the surface of water has a magical effect on all the snipe within earshot. I found this out shooting around the margin of a large shallow mere. Though fully a mile broad, a few shots fired on one side on a calm day were usually sufficient to put up the majority of the birds hidden amongst the rushes on the other, and it rarely repaid me to shoot my way round to

the opposite shore. Curiously enough, the duck and teal which always lurked around the pool did not seem half so intolerant of the crack of Schultze as the snipe, for whenever I took the trouble to make the complete circuit, it was seldom that one or two were not added to the bag from the very ground which nervous little *Gallinago* had thought it best to evacuate long before.

I know several places where the wet rushy meadows which form most of the shooting-ground are nearly always turned into these snipe-haunted archipelagos late in the season ; and precious irritating localities they are, for the more snipe they hold the wilder will the birds be, and the more necessary will it be to flush them, if you do not wish to leave half the stock on your beat unshot at. From what I have written the flushing business may seem an easy thing enough, if a single shot be sufficient to put up every bird. But the worst of it is, that you can never be certain that every bird *is* up. Many a time will you find that the best sport of the day

will be had in bogs and wet fields, from which, at your first entry into them, a preliminary and most disheartening exodus of snipe took place. If—and this is always an “if” worth testing—a fair number have remained behind, you may have a chance at almost every one.

So it is with flooded, tuft-studded ground. There are days on which a single bird, or perhaps two birds, will elect to remain on each little islet instead of joining their companions in the scurry and rush that will most surely welcome your approach. These individuals will nearly always lie well, sometimes like stones; in the latter case, great should be the execution, for except snow, no background—to be Irish again—makes snipe look bigger and blacker and easier to hit than water. You must wade for them, there is no help for it, and cold work it will sometimes be, though no ill effects need be feared unless you loiter about afterwards, or are naturally prone to cold and rheumatism, in which case you will do well to avoid snipe-shooting altogether. It is impossible to keep

dry all day if you really mean to pursue the sport as a sport, and not merely to take a piece of bog or marsh incidentally when after other game.

I shall not enter too fully into the question of health ; but a word of caution on this head is especially applicable when floods are under consideration. Let me then earnestly impress on the reader, and especially the young reader, the absolute necessity of continual and rapid movement when once the feet and legs have become wet. It is simple suicide for a man to paddle all day from one bog to another, or perhaps to cross and recross brooks and wet ditches, and then, as so many do, sit down for a pipe, or twenty minutes' rest and chat, very likely on the sodden ground, or at best a log of wet timber. If you are tired, go home ; if you must smoke (and I confess that even the most glorious day's snipe-shooting would be but an uneasy affair to me without the weed), puff away as you march, and don't forget to carry your pipe in the left corner of your mouth, or many snipe will you miss,

and perhaps not a few teeth will you loosen as you bring your gun up with a jump against the tightly held briar.

Of course you must call a halt for the midday snack; but even then it is far wiser not to allow yourself the luxury of a seat. Even if you have escaped getting wet, snipe weather is usually sharp weather, and after all it is almost as pleasant to munch a Spartan lunch between foot-warming stamps on the ground, as to sit shivering on a cold stone, a cordial invitation to all the germs, aches, and pains that seem to hang most expectantly about poor fallen man when he is bent on having a good time.

Snipe-shooting is *not* a comfortable sport. Unless you are naturally drawn towards it, you will find it an intensely *uncomfortable* one. Unless, again, you are physically equal to the demands it will make upon your strength, and careful to observe the precautions which alone can resist the insidious attacks of damp and cold on your health, it will be actually dangerous. But if, on the

other hand, you are keen, careful, and in sound health, you may enjoy its delights up to the very end of a long life, of which perhaps it will, on looking back, have formed no small part of the pleasure.

But I digress. The reader will perhaps pardon the crime when he reflects that he has not only to think of the *snipe* in times of frost or flood, but that their human pursuer is also greatly concerned in the effects of these chilly phenomena on himself. There is no sadder spectacle in the world than that of a man whose love for any particular sport has outlasted his health and strength. Nor will it lighten the sorrow of such a one to think that he might still be treading the moors and marshes, or still perhaps be swinging twenty foot of greenheart over his favourite pools in the far north, or doing anything else that it almost breaks his heart not to be able to do now, if he had only been a little more careful of himself in his walking and wading and taking his ease. And now back to business.

In many places where good feeding-ground is at a distance from good resting-places there is a regular flight of snipe at nightfall in any weather. In some parts of Ireland it is, or was, a common poaching trick to sit up round small springs visited in this manner, and to wait until sufficient birds have collected to make a shot in the dark tolerably certain of success. Even in their nightly flight to the same small patch of wet ground, snipe maintain their solitary nature by arriving not in a body, but in ones and twos. The suddenness with which they will drop from the gloom above to the chosen place is positively startling to the waiting human being. Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey says that he has always heard their cry in the air before actually seeing them descend; but my experience is that this usually means they have detected your presence, and in that case do not descend at all. Anyhow, once on the ground, they are as silent as the grave, and even in the brightest moonlight it is nearly hopeless to attempt to make them out as they feed.

Apparently it is not long before the attractions of the place are exhausted, for soon they will flit off one by one, invariably "ptchaking" as they spring on the wing, very often continuing their song until it dies away in the distance. A snipe-frequented marsh is a perfect chorus of their cries at night. It has been supposed that the scream, so familiar to the sportsman, is a note of alarm; but it is the one emitted by the bird at all times, and a very striking sound it is when heard ringing through the dead silence of a lonely moor at midnight. Since the two other notes that constitute his *répertoire* are only used in the breeding season, the sportsman may shoot snipe year after year without ever hearing them.

Mention has been casually made above of odd places in which snipe may occasionally be found. These are so various that it is scarcely too much to say that there is no spot from which a snipe *may* not be flushed, provided only that it is either moist itself or somewhere near wet ground. Indeed,

considering that humidity is absolutely necessary to the bird's existence, it is somewhat a misnomer to call any such spot an "odd place" at all. So that from beginning to end of a day's walk after snipe, the shooter will not do wrong to be always ready.

If, on arriving at an unsnipey-looking tract, it is your custom to shoulder your gun, and perhaps continue in a loud voice an argument that commenced at breakfast-time, you will be surprised, on reflecting afterwards on your day's sport, at the number of single snipe which occur to you as having gone off unshot at from "odd places." However, snipe have been seen in situations which really do merit the appellation "odd" from their unexpectedness.

It is no uncommon thing, for instance, for them to resort to the tideway during hard weather, there to feed in company with species to which they are evidently closely allied, such as knots and dunlin, always, however, returning to dry land to rest after their meal, when they may frequently be flushed

from the dry bent-grass so often flourishing just above high-water-mark. The late Mr Thompson recorded a nightly visitation of snipe to some excavations in progress right in the centre of the town of Belfast. Still more strange was a haunt reported by Sir Ralph Payne-Gallwey, the as yet dry bed of the Manchester Ship Canal, where he witnessed snipe feeding, as he says, "within a few yards of machinery and navvies." I myself have seen both a Full Snipe and a Jack at dinner together in the gutter of the High Street of a country town, the Jack refusing to quit long after his bigger but more timorous relative had been frightened away by my near approach. Even a flying visit to London is not unknown to the incorrigible little vagrant, though surely the mighty city never harboured a more incongruous addition to her census amongst all the mixed horde of wanderers who claim her hospitality for a night. Snipe have often been flushed in quiet parts of the suburbs, the last occasion recorded being at Hurling-

ham on November 24, 1898, when the bird rose from the edge of a path traversing a market-garden. I am positive, without being able to prove it, that I saw a snipe fly across the crowded road which leads from Hammer-smith Bridge to Barnes Common, in January of this very year, 1904. Observant persons being in a minority, no doubt many instances have never been reported,—indeed it is probable that the proportion of Londoners who would know a snipe if they saw one anywhere except on the dinner-table is small enough.

To judge by the frequency of their visits, migrant birds do not appear to have any particular dread of large towns, though their stay is naturally of the shortest. The files of 'The Field' relate innumerable instances of such confidence, or, as it most probably is, ignorance as to the nature of the extraordinary scenery which the very much country cousin sees around him. It is not unlikely that the glare of a city seen from the heights above by the travelling birds may actually attract them to a nearer inspection.

Beyond a doubt, the *Scolopacidæ* are particularly moth-like in the irresistible influence exercised on them by brilliant light : no small proportion of the victims found by lighthouse-keepers dashed to death against the blazing lenses of their lanterns belong to this family.

To Woodcock especially a strong glare is a powerful magnet, though science does not seem to have any explanation to offer as to why this and other night-loving birds should be drawn to blind their beautiful limpid eyes with the light of which they are naturally so intolerant. I once watched for a long time a fine Woodcock flitting silently about the lamp-lit entrance of the busy Great Western station at Exeter, only a few yards above the noisy cabs and carriages and bustling human-kind which rendered the place, one would think, a horrible pandemonium to the lonely creature. The bird seemed to know perfectly well what it was about, and though making occasional excursions off into the gloom, it always returned to its apparently absorbing contem-

plation of the steady glow of the gas-lamps. On another occasion a Woodcock blundered against the window of a hotel I was staying in, in a small Welsh town, evidently attracted by the lamplight streaming through the unblinded window. I could have secured the bird as it fell all of a heap; but after I had observed it a few moments, it recovered and stole away into the darkness, no doubt wondering, as many more learned beings have wondered, at the vast number of things there are in the world "which no feller can understand."

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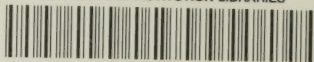
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